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## Talk to Me: An Apology for Poetry

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Christian Anton Gerard entitled "Talk to Me: An Apology for Poetry." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Arthur Smith, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet, Robert Stillman, Robert Sklenar

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Talk to Me: An Apology for Poetry**

**A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Christian Anton Gerard  
May 2014**

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## **DEDICATION**

For Lucy,

Without your patience, strength, encouragement, hope, and unending willingness to be my partner, this project never would have been completed. Thank you for all you are to me, for me, and with me. I love you.

And for my parents, Stephen and Dedra Gerard,

Thank you for giving me the gift of choice, for teaching me to believe in myself, and for your constant love, support, and encouragement.

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2013, Fall: "Operator's Manual" in *The Collagist*  
2013, Fall: "Water Skiing With Robert Creeley" in *The Collagist*  
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## ABSTRACT

*Talk to Me: An Apology for Poetry*, explores the intersection between readers and writers of poetry in the past and the present, the idea of the teaching poet, and poetry's more formal defenses as articulates the twenty-first century poet's responsibility. The poems are informed by the critical introduction's examination of Philip Sidney and Percy Shelley's formally titled defenses of poetry alongside Milton, Wordsworth, and Whitman's defense-prefaces as well as many individual poems participating in what I call the defense tradition: a tradition predicated on trans-historical reading practices turned writing practices; a tradition assuming poetry begets poets who beget poetry because the art is based in teaching through dialogue.

The further I move into the world of English letters, the more I sense the discord (voiced or not) between those identifying as "creative writers" and "scholars." Such discord suggests poets have stopped communing with poetry in the defense tradition, understand poetry's defenses as historical documents, and take poetry's cultural and educational place for granted. Such discord is indicative of the crisis I sense in poetic and educational practices reinforcing the conception of poetry as an isolated activity, which has allowed poets the possibility to disregard the reader's place in the act of poetic making and, risky as it is to suggest, the role of craft in the poet's act of making. I suggest, in response to such discord, that teaching writers to read and readers to write is the responsibility inherent in both poetry and the poet's vocation.

My aim is to re-open the poetic past in the contemporary moment so I am not just reading in the past, but communing with poetry's past as a present: a practice I offer as a response to my perception that contemporary poetry is relatively defense-less. Engaging poetry trans-historically, however, highlights the teacher/writer duality so often assumed by Early Modern writers and helps defend poetry's existence in the twenty-first century. *Talk to Me* relies on the dialogic nature of critical inquiry and creative making to apply the Early Modern assumptions that poetry's ultimate end is to teach and delight.

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**CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO TALK TO ME: AN APOLOGY FOR  
POETRY**

## Thesis

*Talk to Me: An Apology for Poetry* explores my approach to poetry and the intersection between readers and writers of poetry in the past and present, the idea of the teaching poet, and poetry's more formal defenses as I try to articulate how I understand my responsibility as a poet in the twenty-first century. This critical introduction works in tandem with the following collection of original poems to explore my relationship to my poetic predecessors, the relationship between teaching and delight in contemporary and historical poetry, and the counterfactual (fictional)/trans-historical properties that have kept and continue to keep poetry relevant and alive in the twenty-first century.

My dissertation's primary ambition is to examine defenses of poetry in an attempt to stimulate both prose and poems that understand the past as intentionally usable as I demonstrate that, in the English tradition, defenses of poetry proceeding from Philip Sidney understand poetry as a trans-historical undertaking ultimately aimed at teaching poets to be poets. Intellectual discussions concerning the historical defenses of poetry often seek to align the defense writer's theory with his practice, deconstruct and analyze the defense's form/structure, or to compare and contrast other writers of the genre with the aim of producing a temporally linear understanding of English poetry's "progression" from the early modern period to our contemporary moment.

While such discussions have been productive in helping scholars understand what to do with these texts in the traditional academic setting, these discussions have done just that: relegated these texts to the traditional academic setting. The contemporary poet, though, can

make better use of the defense genre if poetry's most famous defenses are made usable by understanding their existence as part of an ongoing, trans-historical discussion about the practice of the poetic art in a moment that, for the most part, demands its practitioners also be effective teachers of the art. During the course of this introduction, I will argue that defenses of poetry, rightly read, are texts produced less for the general reader and more for the practicing poet, that together the texts comprising the defense tradition serve first and foremost as pedagogical texts that provide instruction for participating in the English poetic tradition. The most important elements uniting defense texts are A. demonstrated reading practices that are trans-historical (which resists the notion that English poetry's "development" is temporally linear), B. a preference for a poetic privileging a poetry aware of itself as poetry (and thus an agent of teaching poets how to be poets), and C. the desire for a poetic featuring content (fictional or real) that translates into an authentic human experience through reading and writing (which requires continued poetic production to sustain poetry's trans-historical, self-aware teaching nature). In short, the "defense tradition" works to create a poetry that changes lives by inviting its readers to also be writers and perpetuate the "right" kind of poetic conversation.

To situate my poems within what I call the "defense tradition," I will demonstrate how my predecessors have historically defended poetry less in an attempt to catalog the nature of other defense-writers' writing and more to create a usable past from which to build my argument concerning the historical privilege poets have given to poetry's ability to teach by delighting. The "defense tradition," as I argue, is specifically geared toward the idea of poets teaching poets, an argument unique to the critical conversation concerning both contemporary and historical defenses of poetry.

## **Inquiry: The State of the Union (Poetically Speaking)**

The contemporary poet risks economic welfare and security in an industry clinging to English departments which are themselves asking and being asked why poetry matters, why it should be supported by an academy run on a capitalist business model, a model with no room for fat. Despite the challenges facing twenty-first century poets, I continually hear complaints that no one reads poetry and poets are only writing for other poets. These complaints are usually accompanied by a general lamentation for the “golden age” when everyone read and wrote poems, when poetry mattered.

Alexandra Petri, writer of the recent Washington Post article “Is poetry dead?” has upset a lot of us identifying as poets for reasons ranging from the personal to the pedagogical. She calls poetry “a field that may very well be obsolete,” which she “say[s]...lovingly as a member of the print media” because “if poetry is dead, we [print media journalists] are in the next ward over, wheezing noisily, with our family gathered around looking concerned and asking about our stereos” (Petri). To those of us who need poetry, though, poetry is not just a field of study (though, like anything else, it may be studied), and we may not be as related to “members of the print media” as Petri believes simply because we also engage in the writing and reading of words on the page. For those of us who need poetry, the art and its perpetuation is a way of life. Yet, let us give Petri her due. She is a journalist charged with reporting, and President Obama’s 2013 inauguration is coverable and consumable news. Yet her article can be useful by asking us to ask ourselves whether our own work is dead. Why do we write? How and why?

While Petri is concerned about her job's security, if we read between the lines, we see her argument is three-pronged; in addition to job security (and its relation to poetry vis-à-vis words on a page that are read), her argument's two other prongs are: 1. The material fact that poetry doesn't produce the stars and money produced by music and movies, and 2. "Poetry has gone from something that you did in order to write your name large across the sky...to a carefully gated medium that requires years of study and apprenticeship in order to produce meticulous, perfect, golden lines that up to ten people will ever voluntarily read" (Petri). Here, in her image of the contemporary imagination, we must face the facts that the larger public thinks of poetry as something that just happens and that it happens for the poet first and foremost. I would argue too, that many young poets entering (or even graduating from) MFA programs share a similar conception, which is why workshop focus is often pointed at as the means by which we can make a poem better, and thus a poet better at his or her craft. While this has certainly proven to be an effective measure for teaching poetic craft, it is this conception emphasizing poetic making as a strictly individual activity that limits our value in the contemporary moment.

While Petri's arguments might be weak, they do, none-the-less, appear in a publication from which many Americans get their news, and maybe I am just worried that she has let our secret out. Maybe I am worried that I have had to ask the same question. Luckily, Petri's ultimate litmus test is this: "You can tell that a medium is still vital by posing this question: Can it change anything?" and then after a line break and white space on the page, "Can a poem still change anything?" (Petri). If we are honest with ourselves, we can admit that poets have always written for other poets, which is where the defense tradition begins. We know (whether we admit it or not) that the perceived "golden age," to which Petri alludes, never existed in the way she (or we) wish it would have. "Golden" attitudes, however, about poetry's connection to

human knowledge and use as cultural and poetic tools are pervasive in the historical “defense” tradition.

Even as a practicing poet, I am dubious of the idea that a single poem or even a poetic career can change the world, but by engaging the defense tradition I have been able to understand that if the page is rightly approached, then every poem produced can be a working toward the poetic ideals pervading Sidney, Shelley, and Eliot’s defense texts. Rather than focusing solely on the idea of craft as the basis for strong poetic production, the defense tradition teaches us to properly approach our conceptions of ourselves as poets and our participation in a larger tradition of English poets whose focus is on the inner life of the self (which includes the social and political life) as the self engages the outside world past, present, and future.

## **Inquiry: What Does A Usable Past Look Like in The Present?**

In the following essay I will work through the experience of approaching and reading Gjertrude Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions*, which has been instrumental in reinforcing my understanding of a contemporary poetry engaging the defense tradition. My purpose in working so closely through my experience with Schnackenberg is not to place her on a poetic pedestal, but rather to illustrate the teaching possibilities inherent in creating a poetry that is self-conscious of itself as a both/and situation. By both/and I mean, specifically, that Schnackenberg's work in this book is operating in the fictional and the real, the present and the past, and the work relies not only on Schnackenberg's own individual creativity, but also the usable past she has created by listening back, by incorporating other poets' thinking into her own.

*Heavenly Questions* initially intimidated me because it opens with a "Note." The Note (as I'll call it) notes that *Heavenly Questions* is the usual English translation of the title of the ancient poem *Tianwen* by Qu Yuan (c. 340-278 B.C.E.). Do I need to read *Tianwen* first? Will I be able to understand *Heavenly Questions* without it? The ancient poem "is a series of unanswerable cosmological, philosophical, and mythological questions which, according to a legend from the second century C.E., the banished poet wrote on the walls of temples during his wanderings" (Schnackenberg, Note). The Note also informs me that Schnackenberg is also "indebted to Cyril Mango's *Hagia Sophia: A Vision for Empires*...for two legends about the building" (Schnackenberg, Note). One of the legends claims "the Imperial Door was made of wood from Noah's ark" (Schnackenberg, Note). The other says Hagia Sophia's hundreds of

doors “could not be accurately counted because they lay under a magic spell” (Schnackenberg, Note). Insert increased intrigue coupled with increased worry that I don’t know enough to read this book. And if that is not enough, the Note ends with the admission that “although the poem “Bedtime Mahabharata” departs substantially from the Sanskrit epic...,” Schnackenberg has “drawn upon William Buck’s one-volume reimagining of the *Mahabharata*...and upon translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā*” (Schnackenberg, Note). I am out of my element and I haven’t yet begun to read a poem. I am indignant. I am a doctoral student. I should know everything. I am afraid to say I do not. I remind myself a book of poems follows the Note, and the Note is reminding me that I need always take poetry on poetry’s terms.

I am accustomed to notes at the end of a book explaining borrowed lines, extra-textual allusions, matters of thanks, publishing credits and the like, but when I am holding the book, I sometimes forget the struggle involved in its making, at the level of its making. A book of poems begins, of course, with the making of the poems, and then there is the making of the book itself. Sometimes congruent, sometimes disparate, these two acts are essential to how we most often encounter Poetry (yes, capital P) (either in the journal format, the anthology, or the single-author book). But the act of making clearly isn’t the same in everyone’s estimation. I am again reminded of Alexandra Petri’s question of poetry’s “deceased-ness” and her litmus test “can a poem change anything?” “Poetry taken back to its roots,” Petri claims, “is just the process of making—and making you listen” (Petri).

We poets discuss with mad joy the organizing principles of manuscripts and books we love, but we so often dismiss the importance of Notes or we put them in the back, preferring the poems themselves to the backstory impetus or the inter-art connections, the trans-historical nature of poetic making. Schnackenberg’s choice is indicative of how she perceives the process



of poetic making, a process I had to identify in her work to realize how much I rely (as do many poets I know) on the same processes. Schnackenberg responds to a question in a recent interview by Farrar, Straus and Giroux Editor Jonathan Galassi about the texts that inspired *Heavenly Questions* by explaining the link between the archer and the arrow in Buddha's parable of the arrow (which she first encountered thirty years ago) and the archer from the *Bhagavad Gita*'s beginning. The archer refuses to fight when he sees the opposing army is comprised of his family and mentors, and is reminded by Krishna (his guide) that battle is his duty and the battlefield is an illusion. As Schnackenberg explains, "the archer...persuaded by the god's revelation...will pick up his weapons again. As I wrote this poem I could feel and hear the tension, the energy, and the implied momentum and reverberation of the archer's bowstring being drawn back, and I wanted the poem's lines to register that tension" (Galassi). Indeed the poem's pentameter lines do just that, but Schnackenberg's desire is also registered in the lines of the Note, which is up front and unapologetic. *I have been reading*, the poet's choice tells us, *I have been thinking*.

But Schnackenberg has clearly been doing more than thinking. She has also been feeling. She has been grieving. She has been busy being human. For the poet, such being often translates into making poems, because, presumably, a poet needs poems. So *Heavenly Questions*' opening Note also announces something about this poet in which a reader who needs poems can take comfort. Clearly, for Schnackenberg, poems do something more than just exist; they act as a working through, they act as a catalyst; they are the infinite both/and situation that allows a writer and reader to exist in both past and present, in the perpetual process of processing the past into the present so writer, reader, and poem commune in what Philip Sidney called "the Zodiac of Wit" (85), a place where poetic making is continually attributed to a poet's processing

the lived world and the imaginative capabilities that lead to making a new lived world (what our moment might better understand as fiction).

Schnackenberg might agree with the Sidneian diagnosis. “I should say also that my poems think their own thoughts, evolve along their own paths, believe their own beliefs, exist in their independent existences, and are, in my opinion,” she writes, “thoroughly out of control, and decidedly out of *my* control” (Galassi). It appears that poetry *can* change something: perhaps the way a grieving widow knows her own grief; perhaps the way a reader encounters a poem within a poem via that poem’s interpretation or use of the poem. On a specific level, I know my capacity for empathy has increased by reading *Heavenly Questions*, so has my understanding of the pentameter line, and my sense of wonder at the two’s interaction. These are quite large changes for me. Moving from the Note and into the poems, I am struck with the *Heavenly Questions*’ vastness, the sense of wonder and awe I feel when I try to comprehend infinity or really take Whitman at his word: “I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, / Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, / Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man, / Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine” (42).

“A visit to the shores of lullabies, /” *Heavenly Questions*’ first poem, “Archimedes Lullaby” begins, “Where Archimedes, counting grains of sand, / Is seated in his half-filled universe / And sorting out the grains by shape and size” (3). A fiction has begun in which a narrator is telling us something we recognize, a story, and we see Archimedes where the narrator tells us we see Archimedes. Our minds have made an image of “the shores of lullabies,” though we might never have entertained such a notion. Something else is also taking place in this first line. The past and present, the fictive and actual, the objective and subjective are all taking place

at the same time. We recognize Archimedes as a “real” historical figure, but we don’t recognize this setting for him, so we imagine it because it’s been made for us.

And we happily imagine that an Archimedes who is “historical” (i.e. of ancient Greece) *IS* “seated in his half-filled universe.” We allow a temporal ebb and flow because it is possible in the reading imagination, that place where poetry is taken in and processed, and we are seeing this image of Archimedes objectively, as the narrator gives it to us because we know if we don’t we won’t be able to enter the rest of the poem because reading requires such trust. But in an amazing moment we translate the objective into the subjective and begin simultaneously to identify as/with Archimedes, while we continue to watch him. The stanza’s second sentence reads thus:

Above his head a water-ceiling sways,  
beneath his feet the ancient magma-flows,  
Of metamorphic, underearth plateaus  
Are moving in slow motion, all in play,  
And all is give-and-take, all comes and goes,  
And hush now, all is well now, close your eyes... (3)

Schnackenberg’s process of making has, in ten lines, created something wholly new, never before imagined by anyone, which I am able to imagine because she was able to imagine. Poetry doesn’t *make* us do anything, especially listen. It *lets us*, if we are willing. And it is just the process of making that when the declarative becomes the imperative I can (and do) close my metaphoric eyes and let the poem, with all its simultaneities, crash over and wash gently around me, right?

Just the process of making? So is a child developing in the womb. So is a star emerging from a nebula. It seems nothing short of a miracle that humans can make and poetry is evidence of such process and events. The one thing Petri might be right about is this: “all the prestige of

poetry dates back to when you got the most vital news there is— your people’s stories. ‘The Iliad.’ ‘The Odyssey.’ ‘Gilgamesh’” (Petri). She could have stopped right there. She did not have to continue with, “All literature used to be poetry. But then fiction splintered off. Then the sort of tale you sung could be recorded and the words did not have to spend any time outside the company of their music if they did not want to...All the things poetry used to do, other things do much better” (Petri). A large part of me wishes she would have stopped at “Gilgamesh” or at least before that last phrase.

I read Gjertrud Schnackenberg’s *Heavenly Questions* before Petri’s “Is poetry dead?” I went through the stages of grief for the art. Beside devoting myself to my wife and baby boy, I have given my life to reading and writing. It occurred to me that Schackenberg’s statement, “But *how* poetry can touch this utmost experience of being, before which language falters, I do not know, and *can’t* know, I am unable to know— unless I turn to poetry again...” is the key for me because I need poetry (Galassi). I have turned that statement into the question that constantly lives in my reading eyes and writing hand.

Those of us who need poems can get back to poems by knowing that we need them, by going to poems and poets that need poems and poetry, by acknowledging the poetic process, that mysterious combination of lived and imagined experience. *Heavenly Questions* is certainly a North Star a traveler can point her compass toward as she sets out for something more.

I am cognizant, standing on the beach, of the ocean’s breadth and depth, both physical and historical. It feels as though that body has something to teach me. Stepping in I become aware of all that is possible because of the body’s existence. I feel the movement gentle enough that one floating on the surface might be lulled to sleep and looking back at the beach I’m aware that this force can turn the largest boulders into sand grains I blow off my palm like dandelion

seeds—a thousand wishes on the wind and in the water. The sea feels like the edge and beginning of everything. So too, in this collection of poems beginning with “Archimedes Lullaby” and ending with “Bedtime Mahabharata.” So too, in *Heavenly Questions* where a speaker loses her husband, historical poems become present, and a poet reveals grieving’s process, alongside making’s process and, well, reaffirms why I come to poems in the first place, why I revel in the approach.

## **Temporal Mash-Ups: Trans-Historicity and Poetic Defenses**

Poetry's place in the twenty-first century feels remarkably akin to poetry's situation in Sir Philip Sidney's day. The court has been traded for academia's walls and poetic making maintains (mostly) a supporting role in the careers of poets who teach for their living. Academic advancement is congruous with a strong publishing record (both poetic and prosaic) and high esteem from poetic and academic peerage. It seems the stakes are higher now for poets than ever before. The once "unelected vocation" undertaken by Sidney and his early modern contemporaries has become an industry in itself requiring the poet to teach his or her craft while producing his or her own work.

Paradoxically, as poetry has become increasingly incorporated into the academy and poets find ourselves fulfilling the defense tradition's assumption that poets should rightly be teachers of poets, it seems as if the poetry community has by and large forgotten that when we approach the profession (and the page) we are participating in an ongoing art (and investigation into that art) that, according to the defense tradition, is responsible for perpetuating itself simultaneously as an inquiry into the human imagination and an art able to make the imagination usable for the development of self. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are witness to the most freedom poetry has ever had. This claim might amicably be extended to include (or have roots in) the work of Whitman, Dickinson, Williams, and Hopkins. Regardless of placement, these nineteenth and twentieth-century writers are evidence of a burgeoning imaginative explosion realized in the work and ideals of American Modernism, a movement I believe is too often used as a scapegoat for contemporary poetic production worried less about its participation

in an English tradition and more for an individual poetic image. “Make it new,” Ezra Pound told us, which in our contemporary moment seems often misconstrued as “don’t worry about your place in or responsibility to the perpetuation of the English poetic tradition of which you’re a part.”

Tony Hoagland has remarked that,

generally speaking, this time [our contemporary moment] could be characterized as one of great invention and playfulness. Simultaneously, it is also a moment of great aesthetic self-consciousness and emotional removal...especially among young poets, there is a widespread mistrust of narrative forms...a pervasive sense of the inadequacy or exhaustion of all modes other than the associative (RS, 173-174).

Hoagland’s thoughts are not unusual among established contemporary poets. The comment feels accurate, but what does this mean for the defense of contemporary poetry? Is it enough for contemporary poetry to accept that “systematic development is out...[and] obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity are in” as part of our cultural modus operandi (Hoagland, 174)? Especially when our cultural usefulness is everywhere questioned? I ask such questions not because I am advocating a widespread shift in the kind of work my colleagues are producing, but because the texts on my reading list seem to push for something larger than institutional advancement, a push I believe I can use to make my poems more conscious of themselves as participants in a tradition expecting engagement with its own past as a way to understand its present and future.

In his recent article “Inspiration and Impediment” the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski, like Hoagland, surveys contemporary poetry’s general attitude. He ends the article writing,

maybe the real danger and the real challenge for poets writing today is...namely, a kind of spiritual anemia, the risk of simply being lukewarm, indifferent, deaf...we’ve gained a lot—a kind of aesthetic freedom, a kind of flexibility—but

also lost something very significant. It's too bad we can't remember what it was. Beauty? Passion? Soul? (14).

Zagajewski, like Hoagland, is issuing a sort of state-of-the-union commentary addressing the rut many younger poets have fallen into because we no longer know what to make new or why we ought to do so.

Yet, for all the emphasis on making it new, the Moderns (alongside many established contemporary commentators) also allow access to the importance of the historical lineage a poet must recognize when claiming the title of poet in the contemporary moment. Alongside the intrinsic acknowledgment of the poet's poetic past, the Moderns also actualize Philip Sidney's description of poetry as a "vocation." The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth-century poets have nothing to gain in the political sense (as say a Sidney, Spenser, Lanyer, or Jonson might have), but they do demonstrate status and economic gains, most often associated with academic appointments and/or public fame.

T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, and H.D., among many of the other most visible Modernists served as university professors, lecturers and literary magazine editors. Eliot may have been the most visible among those influential voices, but the point is that here in the early twentieth-century we begin to see poets serving in capacities now expected for the practicing writer choosing to work inside or near the academy, such as lecturing on poetic craft and publishing widely both poems and prose for the purposes of self-advancement and the teaching of others. The Modernists also provide the twentieth (and twenty-first) century with a model for the contemporary poet-teacher so common to the contemporary poetic career with an emphasis on sustained poetic production and conversation via published work in the proliferation of literary magazines.



Yet, the contemporary moment seems to have misinterpreted the message. The emphasis in any MFA program is on crafting publishable poems in the current marketplace while offering professional training for the writer seeking institutional advancement. Generally, then, my poetic generation has encountered work produced by the important schools of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary work published by nationally recognized presses (often the same presses handling the most prestigious first book awards). Thus, and differently than Sidney's and the majority of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century writers, my generation has necessarily adopted poetic patterns/aesthetics that remove the cultural responsibility so important to previous poets from our practice.

However, if the Moderns shaped so much of the century's view of poetry and poets from the inside out and the outside in, what have we done with their model? It is worth addressing how those before us might view our use of their legacy. Would Eliot see the contemporary literary landscape as laboring hard for and continuing the poetic tradition that concerned him in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"? My contention is that we have not rightly looked or listened to Sidney, Shelley, or Eliot, and that we have not acknowledged the defense tradition as a part of our poetic lineage; our art and purpose are floundering in a moment increasingly demanding we justify our cause and expand our definition of "poet" to include "poet-teacher," not because we have classes to teach, but because it is our responsibility to our own work and the tradition in which we participate.

I have identified Philip Sidney, Percy Shelley, and T.S. Eliot as the English writers whose prose defenses form the foundation of what I call the "defense tradition." My interest in looking to their texts, though, is not to recount the history of the English poetic tradition. Instead, my use

of their defense texts will largely be to illustrate the similarities in their conceptual operation as I define the “defense tradition” and demonstrate its value and utility in our contemporary moment.

I had initially thought examining the historical defense tradition would culminate in a thesis concerned more with transformation and adaptation of that tradition in the contemporary moment. I suspected the contemporary “craft essay” to be the defense’s new incarnation. Yet in looking to Sidney, Shelley, and Eliot, one notes their primary emphasis is on the way in which a poet approaches the art and the conceptual pronouncements a poem or poet makes, and less on how that pronouncement is made. The focal point for these defense writers is that the poet approach the page with a historical mind, or as Eliot says, with “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Tradition, 38). Such an approach, Eliot contends, will produce a poet “who is aware of great difficulties and responsibilities” (Tradition, 38). The poet’s difficulties and responsibilities (as Sidney, Shelley, and Eliot agree in their defense texts) are the understandings that poetry is a trans-historical imitative art, which is dialogic in nature. If these are the poet’s difficulties and responsibilities articulated in the defense tradition, then this tradition can serve as a useful tool in teaching poets a reverence for the tradition in which they participate so they may produce new work contributing to the larger discourse that is taking place in the imagination through the continued production of English poetry. Both Tony Hoagland and Adam Zagajewski appear to lament the loss of a “spiritual” element in contemporary poetics in their prose, and the lament is also present in Zagajewski’s poem “The Soul,” which I will cite in its entirety:

#### The Soul

We know we’re not allowed to use your name.  
We know you’re inexpressible,  
anemic, frail, and suspect

for mysterious offenses as a child.  
We know that you are not allowed to live now  
in music or in trees at sunset.  
We know—or at least we have been told—  
that you do not exist at all, anywhere.  
And yet we still keep hearing your weary voice —  
in an echo, a complaint, in the letters we receive  
from Antigone in the Greek desert.

While lamenting the loss of “the soul” from contemporary poetry, Zagajewski’s poem is also working to defend the soul’s inclusion as a necessary component to creating the kind of work he favors; an accessible poetry that is charged with contributing to the conversation taking place via poetry about the nature of poetry. I find a serious correlation between what I sense as the contemporary poet’s responsibility because of the defense tradition and the kind of thinking Karen Armstrong undertakes in *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*. In her introduction, Armstrong writes

“What mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level...the only way you could encounter what they called “God,” “Nirvana,” “Brahman,” or the “Way” was to live a compassionate life...Indeed, religion *was* compassion...This meant you had to be ready to change. The Axial sages were not interested in providing their disciples with a little edifying uplift, after which they could return with renewed vigor to their ordinary self-centered lives. Their objective was to create an entirely different kind of human being (xviii).

Sidney and Shelley appear to share a similar objective that Armstrong identifies as the Axial sages’ objective in early religious tradition.

Sidney makes clear early in his *Defence* that his focus will be the “right poets,” “those first and most noble sort” (87). The right poet is situated within the tradition Sidney desires for England (a tradition Sidney locates in the ancients and his contemporary continental Europe) and how the right poet reads necessitates how he writes. In a very real way, Sidney’s *Defence* is

working to create an entirely different kind of poet, the “right poet,” and the qualities this poet possesses will be at the core of poetic defenses from Sidney to the present.

As Sidney’s *Defence* progresses, the rhetorical “proofs” forming the document’s argument become a model of reading exhibiting his participation (and belief) in a tradition T.S. Eliot would later say “must be labored for” and “involves a perception, not only of the past, but of its presence” (38). Of course, their situations are different. Eliot experiences the need to defend not poetry, but poetic tradition itself and demonstrate that his notions of tradition are relevant in the modern era vis-à-vis the long history of English writing from which he draws. Sidney, on the other hand, believes his charge is *launching* an English tradition as a model for the kind of trans-historical writing community he desires for England. Most importantly different between the two is Sidney’s perception that looking behind him, England’s literary situation is a barren field.

Writing the *Defence* is the measure of Sidney’s belief in both a literary tradition he imagines possible for England and the vehicle by which he will make that imaginary construct actual. The figure enacting Sidney’s desire is the conception of the “right poet” (or as Eliot says, “anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year” (38)), because choosing the title of poet means choosing the poet’s life. The right poet is situated within the tradition Sidney desires for England (a tradition Sidney locates in the ancients and his contemporary continental Europe) and how the right poet reads necessitates how he writes. It will be useful to examine two illustrations of Sidney’s reading practices to clarify my notion that reading with a trans-historical perception of the poetic art leads Sidney to defend the art in a document designed to teach other writers what he has learned from his investigations.

In his “digression” Sidney turns to theater to help explain how English poetry is failing to achieve its potential, but in doing so reveals his understanding that the laws of Poetry rightly govern the right work across all literary disciplines. The fluidity with which Sidney moves between “poetry” and all other disciplines or “kinds” (allowing one to picture another, as part of the same defense) demonstrates his disposition for trans-generic thinking. But as the *Defense* shows, Sidney demonstrates this same disposition for fluidity between time periods as well—what might best be called a disposition toward trans-historical thinking.

Shortly after praising Chaucer and Spenser as well as Surrey and the *Mirror for Magistrates* (the only work Sidney identifies as exemplary of his desire for English poetry), Sidney offers a reading of *Gorboduc*, written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, and first performed before Elizabeth I in 1562. The play, according to Sidney, climbs “to the height of Seneca’s style” and is “full of notable morality, which it doth most delightfully teach, and so obtain the very end of Poesy,” but most important for this argument, “in truth,” *Gorboduc* “is very defectious in the circumstances” (110). This defectiousness “grieveth” Sidney “because it [the play] might not remain as an exact model of all tragedies” (110). Sidney is grieved by *Gorboduc*’s situation not because the play fails to fulfill Aristotle’s tenets for successful tragedy, but because he fears his contemporaries (those same who misunderstand right poets) will be unable to overlook the play’s circumventing Aristotelian rules for its imaginative successes in delightfully teaching notable morality, which is the very end of Poesy. Sidney’s praising *Gorboduc* despite its formal failures indicates Sidney’s literary allegiance is first to fiction’s matter. A specific fiction’s matter produces a form (or manner) specific to and right for its own presentation. This is why (according to Sidney) “tragedy is tied to the laws of Poesy, and not of

History; not bound to follow the story, but, having liberty, [is able] either to feign a quite new matter, or to frame the history to the most tragical conveniency” (111).

This same type of reading is demonstrated a bit earlier when Sidney works through Nathan’s telling a made-up story to David. In this instance Sidney doesn’t just praise the story, but Nathan’s choices as a fiction maker. Most noteworthy is that Nathan “when he was to do the tenderest office of a friend, in laying down his [David’s] own shame before his [David’s] eyes, sent by God to call again so chosen a servant” performed his service by “telling of a man whose beloved lamb was ungratefully taken from his bosom” (96). Sidney’s gloss on the instance says, “the application” is “most divinely true, but the discourse itself” is “feigned” (96). Sidney goes on to say he “think[s] it may be manifest that the poet,” by Nathan’s example (one of two, alongside Menenius Agrippa’s story) which “shall serve” as a proof of the “strange effects of poetical invention,” doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth” (96). The mind is best led (“drawn”) by poetry because poetry best “draws” (as with paint or ink) the mind. The most important conclusion Sidney draws from this line of thinking is that “in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman” (96).

The most excellent work and the most excellent workmen are, as Sidney gives them to us in his examples and glosses, not more or less important because of one time or another. Rather his examples always occupy the same present. Sidney discusses Terence, for instance, alongside Gorboduc and praises both for succeeding despite their formal deviation from Aristotle’s conception of time. To that discussion, he also adds Plautus, of whom he says, “And though Plautus hath in one place done amiss, let us hit with him, and not miss with him” (111). What Sidney means is, “let us afford ourselves the same allegiance to our matter and from it form our manner.” The emphasis is on Plautus’ work and the attitude toward his work that Sidney attends

to in the present. The implication is that reading Plautus and allowing his formal transgressions to be successes in content, i.e., successes in delightfully moving, is an aspect of the “right poet” to be perpetuated. One encounters the same habit of trans-historical thinking in the two instances of poetical invention Sidney provides in the stories of Agrippa and Nathan. In both cases Sidney is most concerned less with the works’ formal adherence to Aristotle’s rules and much more concerned with the storytelling taking place within each story. In the example of Agrippa, Plutarch is writing a story in which Agrippa is telling a story to quell the Roman rebellion and, most importantly for Sidney (and this argument) the story is made up. In David the Psalmists’ example, Nathan is talking to David and tells a fictional story that has real world implications. The fiction separates itself out from the world, which makes it more applicable in the world. It doesn’t matter for Sidney whether a fiction or poetry adheres to the rules if it is crafted so well that (as these two ancient examples demonstrate) the writing can serve as an example or instance of right poetry in *any* present.

Shelley also articulates this conception in his *Defense*, writing that the poet “participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not” (163). Shelley’s *Defense* was a direct response to Thomas Love Peacock’s *The Four Ages of Poetry*, which sought to create a temporally linear progression of the poetic art. In Shelley’s reaction to Peacock, and in his desire for the poet to participate in the “eternal, the infinite, and the one” we can read a preference, akin to Sidney for the trans-historical, for the idea that poetry doesn’t progress at in a linear time-frame, but rather that it is an ongoing conversation teaching poets to perpetuate the conversation rather than favoring a discrete linear understanding of the art. Several examples of Shelley’s own trans-historical reading practices appear in his *Defense*. He writes, for instance, that,

the grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the differences of persons and the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry, and the choruses of Aeschylus, and the book of Job, and Dante's *Paradise* would afford more than any other writings examples of this fact, if the limits of this essay did not forbid citation (163).

Here, as in Sidney's text, we see Shelley conflating Aeschylus, Job, and Dante as exemplary of the same teachable instance. Shelley repeats this reading practice later in his assertion that,

"at successive intervals Ariosto, Tasso, Shakespeare, Spenser, Calderon, Rousseau, and the great writers of our own age have celebrated the dominion of love...and if the error which confounded diversity with inequality of the powers of the two sexes into which human kind is distributed has been partially recognized in the opinions and institutions of modern Europe, we owe this great benefit to the worship of which Chivalry was the law, and poets the prophets (218-219).

While Shelley notes the "successive intervals" his conflation of the writers he lists is indicative that taken together these writers have been able to teach those who, like Shelley, are willing to listen back, and this is the type of reading Shelley is teaching his reader to practice. This understanding of poetry as a trans-historical art ultimately leads Shelley to be able to believe,

"The poetry of Dante may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient world. The distorted notion of invisible things in which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised" (219).

Yet by pointing to these writers moving through history together, Shelley is identifying and practicing the kind of disposition he understands and is calling for among others throughout his *Defense*. By citing these reading practices crucial to both Sidney and Shelley's defenses, it becomes apparent that the defense tradition as it is articulated and re-articulated continually



teaches the poet to place principles in service the art's tradition of teaching before a poet's own personality.

Sidney, Shelley, and Eliot, are less interested (in their defenses) in naming great writers because they are great, but because they are the writers Sidney, Shelly, and Eliot believe have something to offer the serious practitioner of poetry. But what does it mean to approach the present by acknowledging the past, and how can it be useful to our contemporary understanding of ourselves as poets?

## **Inquiry: How Does the Defense Tradition Translate into Making and Teaching?**

I return to Petri's article and wonder what Adrienne Rich would say about writing her name large across the sky, or what about Wallace Stevens walking home from the office? These two twentieth-century poets are contemporary models for the poetic subject to be the poem itself, or rather, serve as excellent illustrations of the defense tradition's ideals played out in the practice of actual poetic making.

Adrienne Rich, who was writing as a radical feminist, activist, and lesbian is a privileged example of the defense tradition at work because she was bringing her experience to her poems in an attempt to change lives, and, as an activist, she did. Rich's poetic was a call to action, which we see in her assertion that,

"whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, censored in collections of letters, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable" (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose*, 199)

where Rich urges her reader to also write so the human experience will not become unspoken or unspeakable. While the "we" so common in her work is primarily focused on women, Rich's feminist radicalism, also translates into an accessibility still available to readers (including men) who didn't live through that period with her and her poems, which allows her subjects to (in the present) become more multiple than singly applicable. Consider Rich's "Cartographies of Silence":

1.  
A conversation begins  
with a lie. And each

Speaker of the so-called common language feels  
the ice-floe split, the drift apart

as if powerless, as if up against  
a force of nature

A poem can begin  
with a lie. And be torn up (16)

The lyric gesture feels simply declarative, but is rhetorically complex. A conversation *could* begin with a lie, but this line is less a declarative statement about all conversations and more a proposal for a particular type of conversation. Arriving at, “A poem can begin with a lie,” however “And be torn up” we realize Rich is announcing the business of her poetics. The line works doubly because a poem can literally be torn up and revised and “a conversation,” as Rich continues,

...has other laws  
recharges itself with its own

false energy cannot be torn  
up. Infiltrates our blood. Repeats itself.

Inscribes with its unreturning stylus  
the isolation it denies. (16)

The feeling evoked from “A poem can begin with a lie” now feels suspect. Rich’s poetic business is not about beginning with or telling lies. The specific conversation evoked in the first line becomes highly resonant of the European-American male model the women’s movement fought against. “Cartographies” first and governing assumption is that if a poem begins with a lie *it should be* torn up because lying is a form of looking away. Here, and in much of her work,

Rich is working out of a historically strong tradition of female writers (in line with Mary Sidney, Amelia Lanyer, Aphra Behn, and H.D.) that will not let themselves or their readers look away. But it is not just about controlling the reader's gaze for these writers. The power in their work and their continued relevance are products of their perceived cultural responsibility that coincide with their reader-awareness.

In "Cartographies" Rich crafts a poem operable on multiple levels through an accessible deployment of language that creates its own reasoned logic. Her poem is not invested in relaying a specific experience as a "this is important because I'm saying it" understanding of poetry. Rather, Rich is much more in line with a poetic thinking indebted to the historical defense writers. John Wright's gloss on Shelley's understanding of experience and metaphor is particularly useful here. "The most novel idea in *The Defence*," Wright writes, "is the view expressed here that metaphor is a direct agent of human knowledge which picks out and perpetuates the apprehension of things or relations of things otherwise invisible to or overlooked by the human mind at any point in its individual or cultural history" (Shelley's Myth, 20). Rich's poem becomes a translation of experience into the "cartography" metaphor that becomes itself a metaphor for poetry's possibility.

Rich's "Cartographies" is deeply self-conscious, but not just of itself as a poem, but as itself as a voice searching for knowledge. Rich's poem arrives (and ends) at:

If from time to time I envy...

for return to the concrete and everlasting world  
what in fact I keep choosing

are these words, these whispers, conversations  
from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green. (19)

The arrival is not a declaration of pure truth, but a declaration of the speaker's belief in the possibility of truth as long as the conversation continues. The poem on the one hand understands the poet's place as integral to its own moment and on the other acknowledges the need for others willing to write. The dichotomy between the writing/fictional world and "the concrete world" is reminiscent of Shelley's belief in a universe of poetry where "all language, institution and form require not only to be produced but to be sustained" (197). In fact, Rich has recently discussed Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* in her 2006 article "Legislators of the World," and she brings to it an essential explication that we can see both in her poems and prose (and the defense tradition in general), in her approach to poetry and the page.

She writes that Shelley's claim that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" has "been taken to suggest that simply by virtue of composing verse, poets exert some exemplary moral power – in a vague unthreatening way." Of course, the argument I have been making throughout this introduction would agree, but Rich's essay elucidates the way the defense tradition translates into making and teaching. Rich continues,

I'm both a poet and one of the "everybodies" of my country. I live with manipulated fear, ignorance, cultural confusion and social antagonism huddling together on that faultline of an empire. I hope never to idealise poetry—it has suffered enough from that. Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy. Neither is it a blueprint, nor an instruction manual, nor a billboard. There is no universal poetry, anyway, only poetries and poetics, and the streaming, intertwining histories to which they belong.

It is in this statement that we see the experienced poet identifying as a person and poet still aware of poetry's use to the individual as a teaching agent, still going to poetry to learn about herself, her place in the world, and the kind of poetry (and attitude toward poetry she maintains to make clear her belief in poetry's teaching nature). In many ways, Rich's words here function as an *ars*

*poetica* that at once speaks to the general poetry reader, but functions also as a charge to us practitioners, offering us what she has learned from her experiences and engagement with the poetic tradition. We can identify with Adrienne Rich, and we can see her defending poetry in all of its incarnations because she teaches us that we need certain poetries at certain times. This disposition is evident in “Cartographies” ending, and it is also alive in her “Transcendental Etude” where she uses poetry to search for the origins of feeling, for the self identification that comes with identifying as a poet and defending poetry’s perpetuation in her work’s own self-awareness. “No one ever told us we had to study our lives, /,” Rich writes in “Transcendental Etude, and continues,

make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history  
or music, that we should begin  
with the simple exercises first  
and slowly go on trying  
the hard ones, practicing till strength  
and accuracy became one with the daring  
to leap into transcendence, take the chance  
of breaking down into the wild arpeggio  
or faulting the full sentence of the fugue (73).

The “we” to which she refers is both poets and people, and in her lines we see that for Rich, poetry and self are one and the same. We see that Rich’s is a poetry committed to acknowledging its past as it moves toward its present. “But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—,” the poem proceeds,

when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;  
when we have to pull back from the incantations,  
rhythms we’ve moved to thoughtlessly,  
and disenthral ourselves, bestow  
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed  
or oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static

crowding the wires. We cut the wires  
...No one who survives to speak  
new language, has avoided this.

The “new language” here is evidence of the poem’s self-reflexive investigation into poetic making, as if Rich is insinuating that there comes a time when one can no longer rely on “the rules” to continue making poems, that a poet finds a voice in herself and then that voice becomes a part of a tradition, “streaming, intertwining histories” rather than the poet working to make herself fit the fashion of the moment. As the poem comes to its close, Rich imagines, via the transcendental, what her new poetry might look like:

*Homesick for myself, for her—as, after the heatwave  
breaks, the clear tones of the world  
manifest: cloud, bough, wall, insect, the very soul of light:  
homesick as the fluted vault of desire  
articulates itself: I am the lover and the loved,  
home and wanderer, she who splits  
firewood and she who knocks, a stranger  
in the storm, two women, eye to eye  
measuring each other’s spirit, each other’s  
limitless desire,  
a whole new poetry beginning here (76).*

As Joanne Feit Diehl has suggested, “This would be the poetry of what is close, precious through personal association, and drawn from the domestic landscape. Such a poetry would pull

...the tenets of life together  
with no mere will to mastery,  
only care for the many-lived, unending  
forms in which she finds herself...” (108)

Indeed the forms “in which she finds herself” are the semblances of the defense tradition at work in Rich’s approach to the page. As Diehl reminds us, Rich’s speaker is the poet

“who protects by becoming, who re-creates by combining into the form of art the foundations of life, a life not of argument or jargon (a life of intellectual displacement); but a life so close to its sources, so open to one’s experiences, that it provides the foundations for a new home and a new world” (108).

Diehl’s comment is more than an apt reading of Rich’s poem, it can be extended to Rich’s entire poetic, as I have shown in “Cartographies of Silence” and “Transcendental Etude,” but also in Rich’s later remarks in “Legislators of the World”:

But when poetry lays its hand on our shoulder we are, to an almost physical degree, touched and moved. The imagination’s road opens before us, giving the lie to that brute dictum, “There is no alternative”

By looking to Rich’s work, we can see a twentieth-century mind opened to the engagement of the trans-historical presented in the defense tradition and we can connect her ideas to those who were before and have come after Rich. Rich teaches us to re-remember Sidney’s plea for the reader to “believe with [him] that there are many mysteries contained in poetry which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused” (*Defence 116*). Rich helps us to re-see Shelley, and believe with him that “all language, institution and form require not only to be produced but to be sustained” (197). It is her approach to the page and to poetry in general from which we receive a startling contemporary incarnation of how our poems can open if we believe ourselves a part of the trans-historical poetic proffered in the defense tradition’s central focus being the notion of self-conscious poetic making.

Eliot echoes such thinking in “Dry Salvages” (and in all of the *Four Quartets*, which I read as focused poetry and poetic making):

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood is Incarnation.



Here the impossible union  
Of spheres of existence is actual.  
Here the past and future  
Are conquered, and reconciled...  
We content at the last  
If our temporal reversion nourish...  
The life of significant soil” (199).

And Whitman, too, works in a language demonstrating his attitude that poetry teaches because it is a self-aware and trans-historical undertaking. “Past and present and future,” Whitman writes, “are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet...he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you” (13).

These examples express a shared belief in poetry’s ability to transcend time and reality through metaphor, while exhibiting belief in metaphor as one of poetry’s most vital elements alongside the trans-historical belief that allows Audre Lorde to say “Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors” (39). “Vital metaphor” as Shelley would say or “to speak in metaphor” as Sidney suggests allows the poet access to “the zodiac of his own wit,” the place where inspiration and imagination meet. These writers often make their poems and prose statements metaphors for poetic practice indicating their belief in the universe of poetry, the communal “zodiac of wit” providing shared cultural knowledge and responsibility from generation to generation without regard to temporal constraints. These poets are self-conscious of consciousness, which is why their work endures, why they are still teaching us, as Brenda Hillman has noted, to “make some sense of things as if [we] were [our] own

diviner of signs, as if the cracks in the oracle bone were details brought from this world into this world” (18).

## **Process and Form: The Defense Tradition at Work in My Poems**

Part of the difficulty facing my project is finding what I'm calling the defense tradition and discussing it in a mode productive for the contemporary poet and student of poetry. Historically, we have few documents bearing the official title "A Defense of Poetry" or "An Apology for Poetry." Philip Sidney (1590 and 1595), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1821), and Gabriel Gudding (2002) have all authored texts bearing this name. Others such as Samuel Daniel, John Dryden, William Wordsworth, William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich have produced texts defending (sometimes poetry as we know it, i.e. verse on a page) among other disciplines, such as music and drama, which were included in early definitions of poetry, and then there are the poems (some of which I discussed earlier) that seem to act as defenses of the art in which they are participating.

Many of these texts appear on my reading lists as primary sources helping me to approach my questions concerning what defenses historically look like and what they include as reasons for the genre's survival. Incorporating the ongoing critical discussion of the defense tradition and poetry's past is also a major challenge for my project because previous commentators have focused the discussion concerning these texts on how the defense texts are constructed and what they are saying, rather than how we might be able to use them.

I noted earlier that the Defense Tradition provides models for reading that can make us better poets and teachers. I have found through my reading that acknowledging the past does not always translate into a past-centric poem, but it does translate into an enthusiasm for my subject

derived from the ideals of inspiration I find within the tradition I am acknowledging throughout this introduction.

Dean Young and Marianne Boruch present two recent (but experienced) takes on the idea of what a poem should do that are directly in line with the ideals outlined in the defense tradition. In *The Art of Recklessness*, Young notes that, “More than intending, the poet ATTENDS! Attends to the conspiracy of words as it reveals itself as a poem, to its murmurs of radiant content that may be encouraged to shout, to its muffled musics there to be discovered and conducted” (4). And in her essay, “Heavy Lifting,” Marianne Boruch writes, “let’s face it: A poem matters because it’s about eternal things—Death, love, knowledge, time—however these are disguised. The great subjects are endless, never used up” (28). I have let these contemporary voices live in my head alongside Sidney, Shelley, and Eliot as I have labored writing my defense of poetry because they re-affirm for me that I’m not alone in my moment or ideals and that above all the poet is a servant to the poem and the imagination as they work within the defense tradition’s ideals of teaching by delighting.

Much of the inspiration discussed in defense texts (contemporary or historical) alludes to the idea of a trans-historical writing community. Noted Sidney scholar Gavin Alexander has, for instance, observed that:

Sidney represents dialogue in his works, but he also expects it. He envisages a dialogic give and take in the darker folds of *The Defence of Poetry*. A dead author can have designs on a living reader, can decide to transform him or her, in Sidney’s theory through the exemplary image of virtue, the Cyrus created “to make many Cyruses.” But this can only happen “if they will learn aright how and why that maker made him” (*Defence*, 79). The reader must open the book and wish dialogue to commence. To view Sidney’s texts as participants in a dialogue is to see them as expecting something in return. Centrally...part of what they expect is imitation or continuation (29).

The imitation and continuation I have attempted to infuse into the poems comprising this dissertation are, more often than not, taking place on a conceptual level because defending poetry in this historical sense has taught me to engage the page on a larger conceptual level, to imagine the poem as an imitation, continuation, application of an idea presented in another work.

In “Defense of Poetry (VIII),” for example, I open the poem referencing Rilke’s *Book of Images*:

In the time I’ve read and lost Rilke’s *Book of Images*, generations of ants have come and gone,  
the river birch we planted last year’s grown shaggy  
like a teenaged boy in his old-man’s eyes—

Opening this way suggests my consumption of Rilke’s work, but my re-thinking of it in the poem’s present becomes my poem’s occasion. Rilke’s ability to locate a subject in the specific and connect the specific to the universal has been indispensable to my understanding of poetic making. “Defense of Poetry (VIII)” moves associatively as the quatrain stanzas spill into one another as an example of the time and memories that have elapsed in the time since “I’ve read and lost Rilke’s *Book of Images*.” This associative movement allows my poem to go both backward and forward, practicing trans-historicity, in the poem’s present. When my focus shifts back to the present from the fourth to the fifth stanza I am able to introduce a new subject into the poem; “what a son or daughter should know first about the world”:

being in the same shoes as every kid who wonders  
how they’ll know when they’re grown up.  
I remember looking at the hardened, pretty  
adults, wanting their value, their seeming rarity.

Oysters make pearls because sand scares them.  
If the world is my oyster, what is my pearl?  
My wife is pregnant so I have been thinking

what a son or daughter should know first about the world.

These stanzas imply my concern is with my ability to be a father and the choices I will have to make about what I show my child as he or she negotiates the world. Stanzas six and seven, then, use the trans-historical pattern I have already established to articulate the notion that while everyone experiences the world differently, or understands the world as their singular world, Rilke's work stands as a moment of universal engagement with the world (at least to my reading):

Then I become worried I don't mean the world.  
Really, I mean what a son or daughter should know about me  
and what I think is the world. That there's so little  
time scares me the most. Since I read and lost Rilke's *Book*

*of Images*, I keep thinking of that one  
line in the middle of that poem in the middle:  
as the evening unbuttons its blouse  
or something close to that, my God.

These stanzas identify the strongest of Rilke's images for me as what is essential to show my son or daughter. Most interesting though for this discussion is that I had the image wrong, which I have purposely kept from the poem in revision. I could not remember Rilke's poem's name or title while I was first drafting my own. On completing the draft I searched immediately for the piece. It is titled "Evening," and what I thought was an image of the evening unbuttoning its blouse in the poem's middle turns out to be, in Edward Snow's English translation of Rilke's *Book of Images*, the poem's first line and the evening putting *on* its garments. I quote Snow's translation of the poem in its entirety so the whole context of my situation might better be established:

## Evening

Slowly the evening puts on the garments  
held for it by a rim of ancient trees;  
you watch: and the lands divide from you,  
one going heavenward, one that falls;

and leave you, to neither quite belonging,  
not quite so dark as the house sunk in silence,  
not quite so surely pledging the eternal  
as that which grows star each night and climbs—

and leave you (inexpressibly to untangle)  
your life afraid and huge and ripening,  
so that it, now bound in and now embracing,  
grows alternately stone in you and star. (99)

My blundering the image, yet expressing a similar concern as that which “grows alternately in stone in you and star” is the real indication that I am engaging the defense tradition. The feeling evoked by Snow’s translation of Rilke’s poem is what I carry with me in my bones, the same feeling that “a son or daughter should know about me / and what I think is the world.” In “Defense of Poetry (VIII),” I had initially been working to bring the literal past of Rilke’s poem into my contemporary poem, but I wound up bringing a completely new image to the world via my emotional imitation. I hope this is a practice Sidney would champion as moving passed base imitation and moving closer to what happens in the “zodiac of wit.”

The irony present in the creation of “Defense of Poetry (VIII),” while it stands as an excellent example of the defense tradition thinking I have been trying to reproduce as I approach my own poems, hasn’t been the case with every poem in this manuscript. But the idea that poems engaging the defense tradition desire response and can be placed in dialogue with my own writing pervades most of these poems by way of direct reference and interaction. In his essay on the early modern dramatist Philip Massinger, T.S. Eliot makes some of his most famous

pronouncements concerning the ways poets consume other poets. The defense tradition's notion that poetry is imitative/mimetic is at play in Eliot's comments, and importantly for me, not just the concept, but also the *action* of imitation/mimesis. "Immature poets imitate," Eliot writes, "mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least different" (Masinger, 153). Eliot's "imitate" here is what Sidney and Shelley would call "base imitation," the kind of imitation we practice when asking our students (or ourselves) to write a poem that is like someone else's in concept or form. The latter part of his sentence, though, is the kind of imitation Sidney champions and Shelley calls "expressive."

When I began the poems comprising this manuscript, I had set out to use at least one line or direct reference to another writer as a means of imitating the practice I found so often in many early modern poems. I had thought this practice would be the key to my idea of placing poems in trans-historical dialogue. What began as imitation has ended up teaching me the concept of poetry as a trans-historical discussion, which has allowed many of the poems present here to be changed by the presence of the past not purely because they include words or ideas from other writers, but because in bringing the past to the present, I have been forced to make the old into something new. This engagement has often lead me to lines, ideas, and/or concepts/metaphors I never before would have been able to think, act, or produce.

Mary Oliver and John Ashbery are two poets who have helped me practice engaging my predecessors as a way to orient myself to the page in a manner consistent with the defense tradition's notion of imitation leading to invention. In my poems "After Mary Oliver," and "Every Time I Read "Some Trees"; Or Dear John Ashbery," I have imitated the spirit of inquiry emanating from their poems "What I Have Learned So Far," by Oliver and "Some Trees" by Ashbery. Oliver's "What I Have Learned So Far" operates as an *ars poetica* in which she works



through her opening question, "...why should I not sit every morning of my life, on the hillside looking into the shining world?" (57). Her answer is "because properly attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion" (57). For my own purposes, it is the "properly attended to," that the poem is operative, and it is a poetic statement that has asked me to re-orient my own poetic thinking as I approach the page. From thinking about Oliver's meditation came my own poem, "After Mary Oliver." In this poem I attempt to emulate the humble responsibility she identifies as a part of poetic making, part of what she has learned so far. "Can one be passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit to no labor in its cause?" (57) Oliver asks in the middle of her poem, to which my poem replies:

Dear Mary Oliver, you asked if one can "be passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit to no labor in its cause." I give thanks my living is writing; the labor. "Be ignited, or be gone," you say. What an ordeal to imagine eternal fire. Most run from it, straight to prayer. Prayer is what I do when I don't know, or rather in a poem it's the way I ask the sky to sing.

Bringing Oliver's question directly into my poem allows the poem to shift its focus and specify the reason I write, "to ask the sky to sing," which is a markedly different arrival than the one I had anticipated when beginning my poem:

It's ludicrous, really, the idea of the famous poet,  
as if a generation's or moment's cloaked in verse,  
as if a poet anywhere in any time could be  
the unacknowledged, but acknowledged legislator  
of the world. What would that mean? All the world's  
people moving through days and nights following the laws  
of a pen they won't or can't acknowledge as the writer of their lives?

Oliver is one of the most read poets in America. She has achieved all of the poetic markers of mastery, and yet here in “What I have Learned So Far,” we see a writer looking back on her career where none of the fame matters. What does matter, she tells us, is the maxim “Be ignited, or be gone.” This last line in Oliver’s poem, along with the poem’s other questions, asked me to make a statement about my own writing career. Early in my poem I allude to one of Shelley’s *Defense*’s most grandiose claims as I work toward my own question, “...didn’t we all / pick up the pen for some vainglory?” I am aware, as I move through this poem, that my early poetic goals were the opposite sex’s affection, “a hand on a thigh, a tear / on the tongue,” and I was dubious of the “famous poet” “...who judges this universal life, deciding what’s in / and what’s out...” Incorporating Oliver’s poem into my own thinking about my career and the reasons I write helped me, though, to acknowledge the universal subjects of life about which we all write and to realize I’m no different than any other poet who “properly attends” to the blank page as a place where the imagination makes possible the internal examination that allows me to arrive at what I do when I write, which is akin to approaching the holy:

Prayer is what I do when I don’t know, or rather in a poem  
it’s the way I ask the sky to sing.

In these last lines of my poem functioning as an *ars poetica* I am trying to articulate the spiritual element to poetry writing that I encounter on my best days with the pen, those days when I am properly attending to my poetic production with an eye to the tradition from which I work.

“Every Time I Read “Some Trees”; Or Dear John Ashbery” is a much different use of my predecessor’s work than “After Mary Oliver.” In “Every Time” I have attempted to work through a poem that has always delighted and baffled me. The occasion for this piece’s

production proceeds from that Sidneian plea at his *Defence*'s end "to believe, with me, that there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused" (116). Ashbery is, of course, one of our most celebrated, but difficult poets and in "Every Time," I am attempting to use the poetic medium to work through Ashbery's poem "Some Trees" in an attempt to demonstrate that readers bring something of themselves to poems, but also to illustrate the kind of conversation that poems can have about poems. Ashbery begins with the affect produced by trees surrounding him:

These are amazing: each  
Joining a neighbor, as though speech  
Were a still performance... (19)

In a similar way, my poem's first half suggests the effect produced by the interaction with the trees in the neighborhood that my friends and I climbed and used as we grew up. Where Ashbery is rather vague in his opening lines, I have invoked specific images to create a context from which my reading of Ashbery's poem can take place:

Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's nothing  
more than heat and humidity rolling  
like a great chariot across the land,  
Midwestern, either hills or flat, but patched  
with trees and fences. There is the weeping  
willow we climbed as boys, our neighborhood,  
a canvas on which emerges a chorus of smiles.  
A winter morning, copied almost with  
carbon from a Highlights magazine page  
where kids stuff themselves in snowsuits and run  
through the water flakes that look like paper,  
taste like whatever colored mitten yarn.  
There's the oak bonfire smoke, the dry, young night  
lit up with the northern lights, their tendrils  
joined as though speech, ferns fiddleheading out  
of my stratosphere's wild, inky eye.

But at this moment in my poem, I realize that I am doing more questioning of Ashbery's than reading it. I realize that, "every time I read "Some Trees," I think how big / a poem can be on just a single page." Here, I am trying to let my poem be aware of itself as a poem in awe of Ashbery's poem. In this way, "Every Time," functions as an ode of sorts, an ode to the sparseness in Ashbery's language which simultaneously produces feelings of solitariness and community, of man being in concert with the surrounding world, a perfect balance between the internal and the external. Ashbery's poem is void of weather, my poem says, but in saying so I realize that I am the weather "I conjure...into "Some Trees" / because it's the only missing thing." In writing "Every Time," I had initially begun working to elucidate how Ashbery's poem works, but I wound up learning that Ashbery's poem is successful because of what I bring to it as a reader. Despite the fact that Ashbery gives no context for where the poem takes place, and only tells us that it is a "winter morning," I automatically imagine, as I noted earlier, the perfect balance between the interior and exterior observation the poem makes, which, for me, is ultimately "...the weather in that / poem where the stars aren't out, but the world is." Writing this poem has simultaneously allowed me to investigate my own love for the mystery contained in Ashbery's poem, but has also allowed me to identify that the poem doesn't operate without its reader and that the poem changes each time I read it because I am different each time I read it.

By responding to Ashbery, I have learned just as much about my own poetic process as I have about his poem. Attempting to put garments on the bare branches of his poem has shown me that, in this case, the mystery contained in this poem is the sense of communal engagement with the exterior world, and the way in which Ashbery's specific experience with the trees he engages produce larger thoughts about what it means to be human in the natural world. While

writing back to Ashbery might not have produced the strongest poem I have ever written, it is a poem that marks my progress in properly attending to the page in a manner consistent with the defense tradition's ideals that each poem can be a step toward consciousness in an art continually seeking knowledge of the interior by engaging the exterior.

Throughout my work with the historical defenses of poetry I have learned that the content championed by Sidney, Shelley, and Eliot is important not because a single person feels something in a specific place and time, but because poetry's readers and writers have and will continue to feel everything on the emotional spectrum throughout the course of their lives. I have learned not to dismiss the grandiose claims of those who have come before me, but to listen to their reasoning for poetry's importance in our world and I have begun to acknowledge their voices as a part of my own. The experiences I import into other poems in this manuscript, such as "Poem in Which I Give My Friend A Flower in Empathy That Won't Wilt," and "Because There Are Nights That Seem To Put One Arm First," alongside poems such as "Matter," and "Vocabulary" are my attempts to turn my poetic gaze simultaneously inward and outward, to acknowledge that by engaging those who have come before me, I might better make use of my emotions and experiences that will translate into accessible, readable, and teachable poems that others can interact with in their own pages.

Yet I cannot only acknowledge the content of my poems and completely dismiss Sidney's notion that "verse is but an ornament to poesy." Turning "my poetic gaze simultaneously inward and outward" has meant accepting my own love for narrative's place in the poetic setting, and this has forced me to pay much attention to the versification that is the ornament of my narrative impulses. My challenge, in this context, has been to work for a balance between my forms and content by using form to bring a lyric sensibility to my love for

poetic narrative. Thus, *Talk to me: An Apology for Poetry* is full of formal experiments representing a wide range of aesthetics from my adaptations of received forms like the ode, sonnet, and Spenserian stanza used in *The Faerie Queene* to more experimental forms operating on ideas I discovered in Charles Olson's "Projective Verse."

Section I's first poem "Ode to Philip Sidney" is structured in an unconventional rhyme scheme, but works to maintain some semblance of the ode's traditional strophe, antistrophe, and epode. I have used the rhyme scheme ABAB CBCB DEDE DFDF GFGE HFHF IEIE EJKLD to guide this ode's transition between strophe, antistrophe, and epode, which correlates to the poem's subject matter; the real Sir Philip Sidney's struggle with Elizabeth I (strophe), Sidney's love for Penelope Devereaux and my imagining Sidney writing *Astropil & Stella* (antistrophe), and the honoring of Astrophil as a model for English poetic lovers (epode). By structuring "Ode to Philip Sidney" in this way, I have attempted to both acknowledge the tradition Sidney would have been familiar with from Pindar, while praising the poet (and his character Astrophil) who was this project's initial impetus.

While "Ode to Philip Sidney" does not adhere to all of the formal tenets for the ode as we see in Pindar or Horace, the poem is more in line with Edward Hirsch's assertion' that "the ode in English separated from its Pindaric roots...but never forgot that Pindaric dream of ecstatic participation, of standing beside oneself and becoming one with the divine" and "the writer of odes walks a tightrope, balancing a criticism of society with an affirmation of the vatic vocation of the poet who speaks to deep-lying powers within all of us" (*How to Read a Poem*, 220-221). The "society" critiqued in my ode is both Philip Sidney's and our own. Using this form has allowed me to simultaneously investigate Sidney's biographical situation, while also pointing to his use of his situation to make the sonnet sequence in which Astrophil becomes the English

archetypal fictional character questioning his love and his creation, his maker's making of him. Because Astrophil is a poet first and foremost, his creation and actions become useful to me through the ode as I model myself after he and his maker while praising their existence.

*Talk to Me* also includes two adaptations of the sonnet form ("Materials; or Revision" and "Defense of Poetry XI; or The Poet Explaining Himself") as a way to engage my poetic predecessors. I have omitted the usual sonnet rhyme schemes in both poems, but I have retained the content development structures of the Italian sonnet in "Defense of Poetry XI" and the English sonnet in "Materials." As Eavan Boland and Mark Strand note in *The Making of a Poem*:

It was the Italian originators who developed one of the features of the sonnet that survives to the present day, the octave and sestet division: One strong opening statement of eight lines followed by a resolution to the emotional or intellectual question of the first part of the poem (56).

In "Defense of Poetry XI," the opening octet reads:

I'd forgotten the moon last night would rise  
like most other nights because nights come, dark  
and droning on for hours while I'm scared  
I've forgotten how to make a sentence or  
because the moon's poetry's bright cliché,  
like when I tell someone I'm a poet—  
I just love that Billy Collins' poems, or  
I don't know anything about poetry—

which establishes my own anxieties about poetic making, while also acknowledging the larger place of poetry in the cultural imagination Alexandre Petri indicates in her article "Is Poetry Dead?" I then use the sestet as a way to resolve the anxieties outlined in the octave by using the

sonnet's compression on my narrative to re-orient myself and the reader dubious of poetry to the possibility that poetry "sometimes gamble[s] for the impossible because" it can, and should.

In "Materials; or Revision," on the other hand, I follow Wyatt and Surrey who, "by shifting the English sonnet away from the slightly more intellectual and argumentative Petrarchan form, gave a new resonance to the ending, through the often declamatory couplet" (Boland and Strand, 57). "Materials" begins and ends in declamatory statement, but I have broken the sonnet into couplets to allow for narrative development throughout the poem. Beginning in the general, "Desire is no price haggler, so when they found / that rust-bucket truck and drove deep" allows me to introduce the couple as the poem's subject, while using the rest of the "octave" to establish tension between them. I resolve this tension in the sestet, which reads,

a workbench, a book shelf, a house to house a family,  
or rather, to make his house fit his family.

She and him had been like Frost's "Home Burial" couple.  
How they'd beat each other with misunderstandings,

breaths smaller than the words required to build them— Love,  
she was saying in the giving, is only the history of remodels.

by using the narrative voice to zoom out of the couple's actions and allow the narrator to interpret those actions for the reader, which also resolves the tension established in the sonnet's eight opening lines.

In continuing to engage poetry's received formal traditions, I have also made use of the Spenserian stanza found in *The Faerie Queene* in my poem "Confession of the Poet who Brought Books into a Public Restroom," perhaps one of the collection's most ambitious formal attempts. *The Faerie Queene*'s stanzas are structured in eight iambic lines with a ninth



hexameter line (which I have omitted in my poem), but it is their combination and progression from each to the next that captured my interest as a way to drive the narrative of “Confession of the Poet.” Theresa Krier has recently remarked of *The Faerie Queene*’s composition that,

“such stanzaic intervals carry readers across a duration in which complex linguistic details of the present and preceeding stanzas unfold, disseminate, reconstellate within the reader, aside from any overt interpretive and cognitive actions of reading. The interval invites the reader to register a gathering volume (not necessarily conscious) of the increasing density of the reading processes just past, whether these move toward interpretive clarity and concepts, or toward clouding, latency, and drift” (6-7).

“Confession of the Poet who Brought Books into a Public Restroom” is composed of eight complete Spenserian stanzas and a final tercet still in Spenser’s form. As the poem progresses, I have used the Spenserian stanza to allow this poem’s content to move in many directions as it makes its references to my own work and process alongside Liam Rector’s poem “I Get a Feeling” and Gerald Stern’s “In Memory of W.H. Auden.” The ten-syllabled lines in the nine lined form forced me to compress my narrative and lyric questioning, but the interval between the stanzas allows the narrative and lyric questioning to progress. For example, stanzas 1-3 are able to make large conceptual leaps precisely because of the poem’s form:

I’ve rung the tower’s bell for so long now  
I don’t know anymore if hands are knots  
or if I’m hanging on by choice. I’ve been  
wanting a pen fast as my heart in those  
nine-alarm moments. Once I invented  
a character I described as “too hard  
and fast” and it felt better erasing  
the “I” and writing “Wilmot,” but I still  
don’t know if I meant “I” or “John Wilmot,

Second Earl of Rochester,” whom I love.  
I read all his letters. I keep reading  
all these poems about poems and poets and

trying to become what I read, as if  
I am convinced that's how a real poem's made.  
Everything in this life happens so fast.  
Even my shits come on like wildfire and  
next I know I'm checking on that wood-glue  
joint I clamped last night while trying to say  
out loud all the poets' names I know so

I can know I know enough. Honestly,  
I've been trying for years to get a shit  
into a poem because Liam Rector's  
*I Get a Feeling*, showed me how to turn  
a phrase, but now that I've finally done it,  
I realize *I Get a Feeling*'s about poems,  
becoming okay with this life. Today  
I opened Gerald Stern's *Paradise Poems*  
thinking I'd try a different perspective...

In these opening stanzas I am able to begin in the lyric self-investigation, which the poem sustains, but as the stanzas progress I am able to add more and more from the outside world into the poem so that by the time I arrive at stanza three my poem is not just circling around me anymore, but also the characters in my first book, the real John Wilmot, Liam Rector, and Gerald Stern. Jeff Dolven has noted, "The [Spenserian] stanza...has an analogous power to filter and render all experience, imposing on it a particular shape, deriving from it a particular kind of lesson" (22-23). In accordance with this thinking, and in line with the product of imitating the Spenserian stanza, "Confession of the Poet," moves further and further into lyric questioning, so the questioning becomes its own narrative device that allows me to make use of my experience, while interacting with writers deeply embedded in the defense tradition. Because the Spenserian stanza allows so much into the poem, I am able, then, to ultimately use the poem itself to teach myself the "lesson" Dolven speaks of, which, at the end of this poem is the speaker's revelation that he is no longer on the outside but,

crouched between knowing and not,  
between urges making me animal,

and this feeling, this discomfort I feel  
I'm almost ready to pass, as human—

These examples are, of course, only a few of the received formal varieties present in *Talk to Me: An Apology for Poetry*. I have also allowed many of the poems to proceed by Charles Olson's assertions in "Projective Verse" that

"Form is never more than an extension of content. (Or so it got phrased by one R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand" (240)

and

"the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment he writes, and thus is, it is here that the, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing shall come to termination" (242).

Such thinking governed the production of the poems "Poet Collaged," "How Many Histories, Exotic Cruelties," "Operator's Manual" and "Poet Seeing Stars." In these poems, composing in the sequence of breath allowed me the linear freedom to write lines, for instance, like these from "Poet Collaged":

He'd never known a glassblower who worked in steel until she explained the move  
from solid to molten to skin thin to the crucially over-tangible point  
when even he could melt— When he walks into her apartment

and she tries to apologize about calling again she means she loves how a body can melt  
without heat and he must admit

what he's cut from himself  
to make himself a wrought iron table where his other editions come  
for beer and whiskey's bite, then erase.

While I still maintain a semblance of a stanza, here, the real emphasis in the linear production lies in the urgency produced by the breathlessness of the narrator's voice as he narrates the poem. While the poem could have been composed as prose, such a form would not have allowed the breath breaks the narrator takes, which are necessary for the poem's highlighting its own investment in fiction making, as well as the poem's narrative development.

I have attempted, here, to reveal a bit about the process involved in making this collection of poems, to underscore my argument that the contemporary poet can create a usable past out of the defense tradition and that historical defenses of poetry are primarily teaching tools for this purpose. Ultimately, for me, the twenty-first century poet's responsibility comes by way of acknowledging a past that, as T.S. Eliot reminds us, understands itself always as a present; a continuing and ever-present collection of ideas by poets for poets. In looking at my own poems and attempting to identify how they are engaging the defense tradition and what that can mean for me (or us as contemporary poets), I am reminded of Sandra Lim's poem "In Radiant Serenity" in which she writes, "...To the tune of / adverb noun prepositional phrase, / we position ourselves" (5). Writing with an eye toward my poetic past has and is changing the way I approach both the page and how I will carry my knowledge to those who come after me.

If contemporary poets are indeed, continually "positioning ourselves" then what will our position be when the university asks why we are useful as teaching poets? Reading the historical defenses (and what I have called "defense" poems) has led me to believe that poets are essential to the university because studying our traditions enables an educational experience that is practical to the student of literature and poetry writing. Looking back to the defense tradition helps us identify the personal/human knowledge and deep self investigation the defense writers

believed could reach out into the wider world, and it helps give our students a context for their work outside of themselves. But what part of that tradition will be carried over into our classrooms if we are not engaging that tradition ourselves?

My project is up against a change in culture and educational practice that has reinforced poetry's conception as an insulated activity, which has allowed poets often to disregard the reader's place in the act of poetic making and indeed poetry's place in the act of poetic making. I have suggested that our conception of poetry has changed alongside our focus of reading, but engaging the defense tradition can counteract this change. Perhaps we have not positioned ourselves as readers as well as writers. Perhaps we have relegated our thinking about reading to a strictly critical body of scholars. I have, in this dissertation, attempted to blend the two. I have come to understand that I am not a single poet operating in a single time. I am, instead, an extension of Stevens' assertion in *The Man With The Blue Guitar XXII*:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,  
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,  
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,  
things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it  
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green  
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks.

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives  
In the universal intercourse.

Through my studies and writing I have come to understand that to continue writing the kind of poems I feel are vital and necessary to the contemporary moment, I must be both poet and scholar and so must my poems. If I can achieve this goal, then my prose and poems will transparently participate in the defense tradition predicated on trans-historical reading practices turned writing practices, a tradition I have come to believe means poetry begets poets who beget poetry because the art is based in teaching through dialogue.

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## **TALK TO ME: AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY**

## Defense Prayer

Maker, I've been thinking of poems  
as riddles. The voices you've made

whisper a geography. I pray for a  
cartography through the silences,

through the question "How do I exist?"  
If there is a poetry where this could happen

let me keep listening in all directions. If  
there is a poetry where this could happen

bring its writers to me, not as blank spaces,  
or whispers as words stretched like skin

over meanings, but as silence falls  
at the end of a night through which two people

have talked till dawn, have said, Let verse be  
verse. Let what's said make sense, let

the Muse say fool look in thy heart and write,  
let what's said be our poetry's defense.

I.

## Ode to Philip Sidney

You wrote a letter to Elizabeth  
and kept your head despite her haste  
courting the continent's princes as if  
she'd give it up for anyone, but taste

so they say meant she gave no piece of breath  
to all those princely suitors left effaced.  
She tried the same with you, who stood bereft  
because William of Orange hoped you'd happy face

his daughter and you did and she did and  
you would have been a prince, the Pope would know  
your name as you'd have raised armies to stand  
against the Spanish who believed Catholic

meant empire and you believed temperance  
and toleration were the ways to show  
that faith and piety should always band  
together, fight unapostolic foes,

but Queen Elizabeth denied you that,  
believed you'd be a threat— O such a show  
your monarch made her virgin epithet.  
And back home your Penelope Devereux

was knowing she'd end up at court and did  
in fifteen eighty-one, maybe then you  
penned your *Astrophil & Stella* and said,  
but Ah! Desire still cries, give me some food.

Oh! In making your Astrophil so love  
both woman and poetry you made one  
from two, made love and poetry not shove,  
but bind, and made a fiction of your own

image. The Astrophil you named poet  
has become the lover who would become  
every poet's story who waits outside  
a Penelope's window crying at  
the stone's weight in his hand and the distance.

Love Poem  
—For Lucy

It's a bench in a park where interesting things happen  
and a park bench where nothing happens, or  
it's a frame of mind. Audre Lorde, Audre Lorde,  
rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos  
of knowledge. It serves feeling. Ezra Pound, Ezra Pound,  
make it new, make it new. The lawn, that crosscut pattern.  
I used to say my dad gave the world a haircut  
every Saturday, but that's a child's thought, right?  
And this is a poem and for some reason I'm not  
seeing the meaning behind it all. I'm hearing the birds.  
I'm singing their madrigals, thinking of a paper I heard  
comparing sixteenth century dance patterns  
to sixteenth century poems, Sidney's, Philip Sidney's  
always with the Philip Sidney. I'm imagining myself old,  
rocking in my wife's great grandmother's rocking chair  
talking, lecturing the wallpaper on the initial strike in  
the voice I heard in *Astrophil & Stella* those years ago  
when Rob Stillman stopped time and read out loud  
those first few sonnets. My life was changed.  
And when I say that out loud I want it to mean something.  
I mean, of course, it does for me. One minute  
I'd never heard Sir Philip's name. Then I knew.  
I don't know what happened then, why I heard it  
the way I did. I spent a good two years believing  
we shared some DNA or all of it. I found some  
relief when they confirmed all humans carry  
Neanderthal DNA. I wrote a poem about it  
like I do when I think I'm the world's center.  
It's Friday afternoon. I'm looking around me.  
The birds are still making madrigals, the lines  
in the lawn look like a parquet dance floor, couples  
all over are holding hands and I'm in love like they are.  
Who would want to make this new? I've spent two bucks  
on two Cokes and despite our tight budget,  
my wife will forgive me the way people in love do  
who won't let themselves become the sad characters  
in fictions we read over and over as if we know it all.

## Holdfast

—After Yehuda Amichai

Sometimes there's no room for the third person.  
Sometimes I think of artifice as if  
my hummingbird heart can't hum or slow,  
so I set down my thoughts on a twig  
and say "I am not I" over and over  
until I'm more comfortable with not being I  
so I can hide something in the third person.  
How else can a voice persist in all the library's pages?  
I began this poem writing "he," be stopped.  
I sat in the stacks imagining every voice in every book  
on every shelf saying themselves out loud at the same time.  
That's how I imagine infinity and loneliness.  
New York city at rush hour, Paris or Berlin.  
I want so badly to separate them all out  
and listen perfectly so I don't have to be  
a voice a part of anything, so rather than the third person  
there will be only a guitar's sound in the night,  
not strumming, but picking out each note  
in Moonlight Sonata, like a single leaf of the weeping  
willow I used to climb, responding to a single wisp  
of night. Behind all this some great happiness is

hiding. And still, most nights, I sit in the dark,  
knees drawn to my chest and all the words I know  
dangle like ghosts I can't grip and I can't stop gripping.



## The Unutterable Self

I'm preoccupied, trying  
    to pin down a self, trying  
to understand that self  
    in the context of a whole.  
Charles Darwin sailed five years  
    as geologist aboard HMS Beagle,  
to map continental shores.  
    Curious, he collected  
specimens, living and perished,  
    and theorized species' transmutation,  
begetting Natural Selection.  
    Theory can't locate a man's mind.  
I can only know my world  
    in senses, endless categorizing,  
reworking those feelings  
    I call memory.  
The man with the blue guitar knows  
    *things as they are are changed*  
*upon the blue guitar*. Stevens knew  
    a self's world breathes  
in imagination. I didn't know  
    we sometimes create our world  
from shards of. In the present  
    I imagine myself retired, always  
surprised by a death, how even  
    the author's anticipated end, in its billowing  
cold gives birth to something living.  
    Imagination, the terrifying bellows  
of breath to understanding  
    like an old man bent in front of a fireplace,  
who knows what he needs  
    at night to close his eyes.

## Defense of Poetry I; or Poem in which I can't Imagine My Own Death

Dead fathers have been my obsession  
for years now. I've looked to those newly abandoned

sons, like Ed Hirsch and Mark Halliday so I could cry  
for my own father who is still living.

Something about the deadness of a dead father.  
All of the questions I imagine I'll need to ask the minute I can't.

Now I'll be the dead father and my son doesn't know it  
yet. I've begun reading everything I can about imagination

so I can prove to him I'll never leave if he can imagine me,  
which means I'm learning how to reimagine everything,

starting with how I imagine my son. I keep saying  
Jill Rosser's "Revisiting the City of Her Birth,"

*I wonder / why I ever wanted to read a book, / such a time- /  
consuming life draining impediment, precisely /*

*what I feared she'd be when I allowed myself / to admit  
I feared her, before she showed her face.*

I've been trying for years to say poetry's power  
rests in mystery and imagination, what fits in a fiction,

so I've become dubious about the rusting argument  
arguing poetry's about making truths— But there it is,

that admission I have to believe was once unutterable:  
*when I allowed myself / to admit I feared her,*

*before she showed her face.* I spent thirty-nine weeks  
before my son arrived worrying how I'd find time to read, to write,

to carry on with the business of living. Marilyn Kallet said, Relax,  
you'll find a way to do what you have to, something will change—

your writing will deepen.  
I didn't know how to believe her then.

Mark and Ed are sons and fathers. And now that I'm a father  
I keep hearing their voices. *Give me back my father walking the halls,*

Ed cries, and *Everybody's father dies; but* / Mark admits  
*when my father died it was my father.* How can I face myself

and grieve my father who is still living? How  
can I look at my son and not imagine him grieving me?

I used to be fine with my own mortality.  
Parenting, it seems makes the old ego a new frame

of mind, a picture of what's felt when the heart wants nothing else  
but to change the way it once felt.

I stood that night, after talking with Marilyn, looking at my own ego.  
You're too selfish for fathering, my ego said, and look,

you're so selfish you've imagined me floating above you,  
like one of Plato's ideal yous. You can't hide from me.

And I won't lie. You're the best there is at being selfish.  
You're so good at being selfish you can't imagine your own death,

being the dead father and leaving your son with a life's worth  
of questions he doesn't know how to ask.

If I were you, I'd start asking why you're waiting for your death  
to start saying the words a father never knows to say.

## Vocabulary

Maybe you meant to say, Doctor. Maybe you meant,  
Doctor is everything fine? Mother and child?  
But you said Father instead. As if there was a father  
different than the one in the room, yourself, you

new father standing in a room looking at a new mother.  
Maybe you meant to say, God. You probably meant  
Father as in Reverend. He stood in front of the church  
where you used to go on Sundays to sing yourself

into the second and third persons. You could see  
yourself talking to yourself as if you were not yourself  
but some other body moving its lips to the organ.  
You felt another presence in your voice

as if the hymnal's words were directions for the self  
you could see yourself addressing in the second person  
from the third person. Reverend, you once said,  
I call you Father I call you Reverend I call you

Sacred and Holy, these words nobody can explain;  
these felt words that feel like the greatest hoax  
and the most real. It's the both/and that troubles

you, he said. How a person can become one thing,  
a father, for instance, and a child. You'll be  
standing in a room one minute, just a son. Then,  
a plow, a yoke, a row to hoe, like nothing happened.

## Harvest

Little weathered vineyards live in young bones,  
soft as the egg yolk developing a head,  
and breathing, wide and heavy as moose shoulders,  
buckles a boy to his knees.  
So walks the ravenous, dreamer of dead, on tiptoes,  
as if grapes become wine without being told.

Once, I stole pistachio pudding off a friend's spoon. He told  
his mom, who told my mom. My conscience beat my bones.  
*But I'm hungry, I said, down to my toes.*  
What were you thinking? Where is your head?  
*It's cracked, look, here, like these yellow yolked knees.*  
*Drought lives in my tummy and a hen nests on each shoulder.*

Shouldn't flowers, not hens, make homes on young shoulders?  
Mystery makes soil a being, not being told.  
Inside the ground, roots swallow knees,  
take ever-so-gently the taste from old bones,  
and make food for thought in little grape heads.  
Doesn't life live in the ground between toes?

Seal-fat and moose-meat warmed my peoples' toes  
before there were buildings, like hens, on Earth's shoulders,  
and polka-dot moonbeams lined forest grown heads  
while dances to rain-gods and dirt-gods told  
my people that grapevines lived in their bones  
and to make wine, one must bend at the knee.

No child should hold the world's weight on his knees.  
They'll buckle and crack the eggs under his toes  
and he'll never know how to harvest his bones  
or breathe off the weight of clouds like moose shoulders.  
Since cracked knees can't dance, no one will be told  
how grapes become wine or a yolk makes a head.

Conscience, you didn't know fists could pass through heads  
and the ground doesn't quite know how to swallow me.  
The vines in my bones weren't ready for cold  
and the grapes won't live on unless the sun shows  
that wine will be made if it squeezes a boulder.  
How will you learn that you aren't just your own?

Every Time I Read “Some Trees”; or Dear John Ashbery

Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe it’s nothing  
more than heat and humidity rolling  
like a great chariot across the land,

Midwestern, either hills or flat, but patched  
with trees and fences. There is the weeping  
willow we climbed as boys, our neighborhood,

a canvas on which emerges a chorus of smiles.  
A winter morning, copied almost with  
carbon from a Highlights magazine page

where kids stuff themselves in snowsuits and run  
through the water flakes that look like paper,  
taste like whatever colored mitten yarn.

There’s the oak bonfire smoke, the dry, young night  
lit up with the northern lights, their tendrils  
joined as though speech, ferns fiddleheading out

of my stratosphere’s wild, inky eye. Maybe  
the weather I’m thinking isn’t weather  
anyone can forecast. John Ashbery,

every time I read “Some Trees,” I think how big  
a poem can be on just a single page.  
How many years have I walked outside, said

Trees, are you trying to tell me I am anything?  
Am I hoping there’s anything more than ambient light?  
What, trees, do you feel in rain and wind I should know?

I conjure my weather into Some Trees  
because it’s missing, or so I’ve thought.  
The wind doesn’t wind through itself.

Dear John, the weather I make in your poem  
so void of palpably tangible atmosphere  
is anything but forecastable, is what I bring

to this grove of trees I don't believe a forest proper,  
but a wooded square inside my neighborhood  
where your poem happens past, present, future.

The weather in your poem where I am a man  
unprepared for facing myself, my weather, your poem  
where the stars aren't out, but the world is.

II.



## Poet Seeing Stars

On the eastern seaboard,  
it was night and he said  
the beach at night is my favorite place on earth,

but he hadn't been  
to all the earth's places.  
Down the beach, his wife noted, were people

circled, a fire throwing  
    auras in the air,  
 not shadow people, but auras as Plato must've seen.

Her husband, the poet  
must think the scene is like  
standing outside Plato's cave, looking not in, but up

at the stars, standing inside  
a universe inside a universe  
in a universe whose stars are a freighter's portholes.

She said out loud,  
                        though hushed  
in the singing wind that was a siren to them both,

those glowing dots  
in the surf  
remind me of you singing The Cure's *Just Like*

Heaven in your room  
in the apartment, I saw  
when you turned lights out. The room was a night

without a roof  
                    without walls  
without electric lights. You told me a story

about your grandfather's  
                                right hand man  
who came in one Monday, said he'd finally

re-roofed his house,  
                                which looked nice,  
but he and his wife couldn't sleep because

the roof blocked  
                                the stars  
they were used to watching before sleep.

I think about that  
                                all the time,  
the poet's wife said, watching your face

in the dark,  
                                how you sounded  
so sad for that time and guy and his wife,

their poverty,  
                                but do you think  
they were sad or do you think it's more sad

all our nights  
                                aren't like this?

## Defense of Poetry II

Give me the driving in a tiny green car and  
a six string acoustic strummed to damage.  
Give me a lip bitten despite the dark and  
the way a streetlight insinuates safety.  
Give me the waiting while the black dress  
is traded for another black dress and  
then another black dress before jeans and  
a sweater will be what is worn on the walk  
to the bowling alley near the street's end  
which is also why I'll take hours talking  
about the romantic nature of bowling leagues.  
Give me a humpback whale breathing in  
the dusk and the dawn below the cliffs  
where three million birds are making love.  
Account now for the crying at a wedding and  
the crying it takes to sleep through the heart's  
hardest hurricanes that seem never to have an eye.  
There is the voice in the shower and the car and  
there is the voice on the phone and across counters,  
tables, dance floors, open fields and campsites.  
Give me the fire that is hardest to start and  
the breath kindling the stories told and retold.  
Say over and over the scientific names of passion-  
flowers, iris and tulips, succulents I have to touch  
because they are Earth's connection to outer space.  
Give me every language in the world and  
every word of every language in the world  
but don't, if there is one, give me a word meaning  
the way you are my orange-purple infinite mystery.  
Such a word, darling, would crush me, what  
I've given my life to never figure out.

## Matter

That word you can remember so much you can taste  
your tongue the last time you said it, remember  
the room with the walnut table and chairs, the blue  
paint between warm and cold, bright and dark, bold  
and bolder, the woman telling you to go  
away, or rather, anywhere. Go. Go—  
How you stood in that room feeling like a place.  
How the room was a place like infinity. No, no,  
that was the whiskey eating its tail inside you.  
Inside you. *Inside* you. *Inside*. That's where  
she said you need to go. Inside you, she said, And  
not soul-searching— You can't search for what's  
somewhere in a locked room throwing itself  
at walls once thick with padding, but now's worn  
down so the metal rivets are bare and glistening.  
Your soul's broke off its teeth trying to bite  
off the rivets, trying to break out of this  
room you built somewhere inside. You've imagined  
inside you is like this blue room though, this blue  
dining room where a family could sit to eat or  
put together that jigsaw puzzle, the rolling hills  
you said you'd roll down with your son. In this blue  
room there are voices. Voices like salt in a hillside,  
like gold in a river's dust. Her voice saying everything  
you can see, almost, if you walk the bank or go into the hills.  
If you don't stand on the outside, will yourself to go in.

## Permission

My friend used to claim no one'd ever passed him  
on the road, which I said was ridiculous and made him  
the universe's center, as if all roads don't lead home.

Doesn't every road have a parallel somewhere?  
This isn't an algebraic calculation.  
This is the idea of roads, that we're always on them,

or one, and that we're always moving.  
Let's take the back roads, my wife says,  
so we can see something beautiful.

Beauty, says Sir Joshua Reynolds, is for anyone who seeks  
a serious road, not just aesthetes. But on the road,  
I'm never over myself enough to see outside the white lines.

I'm a complicated man. The road complicates time.  
We've got this time together, Lucy says, can't we enjoy it?  
On the backroads, in my mind we're in a black hole,

and we could have been there an hour ago if only—  
As much as I look in the rearview, you'd think I could see  
myself the way she sees me. Maybe then I'd understand

I'm not the complicated man I want to be  
believing travel's never easy, imagining myself a man ragged  
walking on the roadside and a man riding ragged

in my F-150's comfort, checking the clock, not seeing  
the herd of black bears in my periphery are actually  
black angus littering the hillside as in a pastoral.

It's always the journey, people are saying, not the destination,  
it's the where, not how you get there. I should spend more time  
reading Chaucer and Wordsworth who, like Lucy,

see the vernacular in being where you are, who believe  
travel and place are the same, the getting there is there.  
How I have separated travel and travelling

because of what might happen on the way, because  
all of my roads are serious roads already written.  
I have been sitting at a crossroads in a Midwest nowhere  
for hours laying on the horn, screaming for some unseen thing  
to turn in front of me. Permission is the right of way  
I can't imagine or maybe that I won't.  
But I have spent today looking at blank pages as signs.

## Usable Past

I've been restringing the lights on the house  
    readying for winter again, when we need  
those sometimes twinkling, sometimes kissing, sometimes  
    out of control flashes to remind us the neighborhood's

not soul-less. This strand sags in the middle like  
    a prepositional phrase. I can never wrap the  
new LEDs around the corner like the old glass bulbs  
    because their size, their weight, like an iamb's,

would hold fast on the roof's edge, making the turn.  
    Maybe I'm forcing the lights' meter into form,  
trying to make too much with too little, or maybe  
    I don't know how to trust the lines together or apart.

Can't help thinking of a friend who collects pictures  
    he wants to imagine again and again. He puts them in files.  
I think of the boxes of lights  
    stacked in my attic, all those years of lights wound

into each other; my unwrapping, straightening them,  
    every year laying them out and working through  
each bulb to find the one gone wrong; my compulsion  
    to put up the lights that no longer light

because there are no more glass bulbs, or because  
    my father and grandfather struggled through the same  
lines; because the dark line behind the new  
    is a second coming, which I believe means

I'm still trying, which means they live in me.  
    Isn't memory like this? I used to wish we'd give up,  
be that house with a single candle in every window,  
    nothing else. To be so constant and easy

year after year. The lights I fight aren't only mine.  
    They are my labor for a family gathered  
in memory. The are my epitaph to Christmas  
    my way to invite the neighborhood to pause with me

and believe in memory's mysteries written after dark,  
    'tis the season for labor and looking, for believing  
in a magic we don't want to explain, when we stroll  
    through our streets and look at the new world

we've made in lights, the new world of our childhoods,  
    what we've made together out of our pasts, our faith  
that the wisest scholar of the wight most wise  
    By Phoebus' doom, with sugred sentence says

That Vertue, if it once met with our eyes,  
    strange flames of love it in our soules would raise.



### Defense of Poetry III

*Paradise Lost*'s first lake  
the lake with liquid fire

burning in a poet's beastly mind  
where everything explodes

sometimes. Don't you love  
thinking of Milton saying inside

and out loud *Paradise Lost*?  
Which was the fire's kindling?

The inner voice?  
The uttered words?

Man's first disobedience?  
The fruit? When Adam & Eve,

they hand in hand with wand'ring  
steps and slow, through Eden

took their solitary way? Maybe  
Eden's lake where four streams'

murmuring waters fall and  
the fringed bank is with myrtle crowned,

Eve's crystal mirror? She and Milton  
saw in that water her virginity,

which was herself, Eden's creation  
manifest in man and woman.

Lakes hold liquid, are. Oceans,  
we say, are the epitome of lakes.

How to say virginity's epitome?  
Maybe it's like thinking love's

molten, the lovers making it are  
volcanoes. We say we know

by difference: something is  
because of what it's not,  
  
but Satan's liquid fire lake  
and Eve's myrtle crowned mirror  
  
do what lakes do, hold  
themselves still and awful,  
  
the seconds after two lovers'  
first love, when you know,  
  
you're looking into  
the other's wide open  
  
eyes in the dark.  
You believe you are  
  
seeing the light or  
a new light, that  
  
something's changed,  
you or her or him  
  
or the world and  
you are hand in hand.  
  
A lake is an ocean  
is a volcano, is  
  
a fiction. You've become  
more than a body  
  
of water. If you could  
see inside your lover's  
  
head, you'd describe  
lava rivers flowing,  
  
then pooling  
in synapse after synapse.  
  
You would make a map  
of the ring of fire,

see lava as the world  
giving everything

to start itself again. You'd  
hear the new world's hiss

against the shoreline  
and imagine deep down,

some miles under  
the explosion, the world isn't

smoldering orange or smothered,  
some fires aren't looking to go out.

## Poet Arsoning

Maybe it's fall and we're talking about making out in the kitchen.  
The door could be open, leaves blowing in or  
not as if we aren't here.  
Haven't we both been those leaves?  
Background to some season, afternoon, evening? A sign,  
knowing the other knows it's time to leave?  
You're saying boys' names I won't remember.  
We're being honest.  
Jack was your first.  
Tony with the tiny penis was your first in the woods.  
Something about trees, the leaves,  
the way he cared for the fire  
he built you. Maybe  
this is where a metaphor should go,  
between your past and me telling you  
it was fall, the leaves already down.  
A woman I'd wanted for years knelt down on the floor.  
I sat on the bed's edge saying prayers out loud.  
I was narrating our story.  
I began at the beginning.  
She called it hot, kept looking up, stopping sometimes  
to add a missed detail, a smile,  
sometimes to tell me to keep talking.  
She began asking how our story ended.  
It was clear we were not going to be a thing.  
This was what we'd have. Then  
deus ex machina:  
The sun hit the horizon's cliff.  
The sky turned forty or fifty shades of orange.  
The room turned  
orange, so orange  
she rose and sat next to me and held my hand.  
Maybe leaves falling as always isn't any kind of special setting.  
In my case the leaves did nothing except what they always do.  
If they hadn't the room wouldn't have  
turned orange, the world wouldn't have  
been worried about the story's end.

## Pastoral

It is now illegal to herd sheep  
through the canyons and their accompaniments  
in the lower forty-eight. How then

are we to read America's story?  
What will become of the strong silent  
cowboy. Can we say cowboy anymore?

I have made camp half way up a nameless  
mountain. Tomorrow I will see the fifteen  
sheep I purchased from a southwest Virginian.

I will herd the sheep to my home  
in eastern Tennessee. I am an outlaw without  
a gun. My world is taking off its blouse.

Samuel Daniel was right. The wise are above  
books. It is for the General sort that we write.  
The man who used to own my sheep kept

a large white farmhouse clad in a black roof's armor.  
He said the white cools in summer, the black heats  
in winter and he lives accordingly up or down

in the house in which I saw no books.  
Now that I walk with sheep I feel the wolves' circle,  
though he said none are here. I feel the black bear's

taste for flesh, though he said bears are afraid of man.  
I've bought black electrical tape and have crossed out  
the Cowboy printed on my tee shirt. I walk back

to Tennessee a general sort of man who believes  
the cowboy man I left yesterday to be wise and  
above what I am doing here.

I'd thought these letters would find you  
somewhere after I had returned with my flock,  
after I had taken them to market or wherever

they're supposed to go. I'd thought this waterproof  
paper would be the key, surviving my story into what  
I cannot imagine. But for safekeeping I will

print these words on the skins I've skinned and  
tanned. This will be my legacy, my way  
to bring the America's story back into view or rather

my story is not the words on the skins of the sheep  
who have helped me outlaw in a time without outlaws  
but the skins themselves, which you hold in your hands.

## Operator's Manual

The UPS man should be here by now  
with the rotary tool attachment I sent away for by email.

I have tracked the parcel, paced kitchen to the porch,  
sat cross-legged in my green vintage La-Z-boy pretending

to read Nabokov's *Pnin*. The first ten pages  
are excellent writing. John Updike's right, ecstatic prose.

*Pnin*'s the kind of guy you drink tequila with and go TP old man Smith's yard  
because he's always out in his garage building things  
I plan to build when my rotary tool attachment arrives.

My rotary tool is a Dremel.  
The attachment is a small router table.

Sure, I've built shelves before (one strong enough to hold a microwave)  
but when the router arrives I'll be rounding my edges, grooving and shaping  
like a drunk's shadow across alley walls  
on the kind of night feeling like Bob Seger had everything right.

I drove once across America with an ex-professional bowler turned bucket-truck mechanic.

Somewhere in Utah's desert he said he met Seger.  
In the Seventies. Right after *Night Moves*' release.  
Seger's tour bus caravan stopped for service  
at the RV shop where Tom was a shop boy.

Seger burst out his bedroom door.  
Whitie-tighties on one half (cowboy hat on the other).  
Whiskey in one hand (Marlboro in the other)  
raising hell because Tom woke him up.

Maybe Tom's tale was tall, but I doubt it because the story ended with him  
asking Bob to have a drink and go bowling.  
Sure, Seger said, but stood him up and there was a long awkward silence in the truck  
and the desert turned that page. I'm sure

if I can build the Adirondack-style bistro set I've promised my wife  
for our already passed anniversary  
and the one by twos I plan to use for the seats have ass-in-palm perfectly  
routed edges, I'll be the kind of man Seger wouldn't have stood up,  
the kind of man Seger would still be talking about in a Nashville studio.

I'll be the man who ran against the wind and won. A router  
used to be a ruffian, a plunderer, a rogue or robber, but  
in the right hands a word can round and become  
that look, the lovin' in my baby's eyes.



## Pastoral Instinct

I've been eating her Midol this morning  
    since I bent to pick up a hickory scrap  
to practice routing on the new router  
    I ran out and bought after receiving  
the rotary tool attachment I sent away for  
    by mail, which arrived, burnt up the tool,  
and induced the kind of panic a man panics  
    when he's alone in the workshop, a man  
and his tools and her birthday's tomorrow.  
    Of course I looked at the wood scraps,  
the picture-frame pieces I'd already mitered  
    and thought what the hell? Why not blow her mind  
by laying a bell-shaped rout on these edges,  
    so it looks like I know what I'm doing?  
Can "rout" be a noun and not mean "to fight"?  
    The OED says "a sharp sudden pull; a jerk,"  
"a bellow or lowing sound, as of cattle," and  
    "a loud noise, especially of the sea, thunder, etc..."  
as uses for "rout" as a noun. I experienced  
    all of these in bending for the Hickory scrap  
when my back decided I should imagine  
    what a wolf's teeth might feel like if I stray  
too far in my thoughts, believe I'm able  
    to believe I can make what I want when I want.  
I was proud of using rout as a noun in a thought.  
    A poet's supposed to be patient with thoughts.  
Impatience is a wolf in the pasture at night.  
    I am lying on the floor, a newborn calf.  
How can I stand, then run without panic, keep  
    whatever's wandering the night's pasture hungry.

## Poem Like a Room Within

Because a word written is still a word within  
the hollow of a bone in a wing of a robin.  
Because robins bring the good word everywhere.

Because somebody said a bird in the hand's worth  
two in the bush, which is a popular saying, but  
it's really a metaphor—for what though— A robin

in the hand is a robin in the hand. A robin  
in the bush and another robin in the bush probably  
means an ancient nest-building ritual, the bringing forth

of something new and something the same into  
a world pretending its newness has never come before.

T.S. Eliot, sing me your song of tradition, as I build my house,  
those who taught you architecture's intricacies.

All my math teachers taught me to show my work.  
You show your work after writing "East Coker" out  
on a long chalkboard wrapping all four walls  
of my brain's little reading room.

I never stand in the middle  
and delight in "East Coker's" reasonableness.

I stand watching the room begin to shake.  
There's a crack, then many cracks, maybe in time,  
maybe in a narrative I'm learning to let live  
in incontinuity. Then the cold sting of air.

III.

## Writing Hand

Winter-time's when I pull the dead  
grass from the garden bed because the spiders are dead  
or have moved to other haunting grounds  
in my mind as I sit down in the dirt  
and the mint leaves come off their stalks  
inch by inch while I pull the dead from the earth.  
How often I've wandered into gardens or woods  
and thought how near to nature I am. How often  
I have sat watching a clover grow with the same attention  
I give to confessing my obsessive compulsion  
near the knife-block, as I imagine pulling my own dead  
from myself. How it would look, the paring knife stuck  
in my thigh, the warm blood tricking me into calling it life.  
Come now. Blood is no more life than a cloud resembling  
a goose is a goose. My fingerprint ridges are filled with  
whatever makes mint smell like mint. What a condition.  
Hands that have damaged. Hands unafraid, ripping clover  
from the ground. Hands delighting in the discord  
struck by the bee's sting as it crawls from underneath  
a clover's leaves. I sat to weed, to make this garden  
a thing more beautiful than nature could have made.

I sat striving for what should be and could be, but  
the tiny bee, its stinger in my green thumb, its body  
writhing, burying itself before me reminds me  
my making a golden world means accepting the fallen  
world, where I live. If this garden is my trying to make  
another nature, then I must delight in my throbbing thumb,  
the pain that happens, when though I pray,  
I mistake my sounds of penance for forgiveness.

## How Many Histories, Exotic Cruelties

the Staranová Synagoga's courted since 1270.  
Click Click Click— Staranová's Spanish tile, fourteenth-  
century stepped brick gables— glass windows stained with  
so much an atheist could believe (at least while looking). Click  
Click Click the shutter Clicks  
the role rewinds into itself like my wife when I said  
I'd been a criminal in a rental car with an old flame  
for closure. Staranová, I can't make out your name  
in English, but I like to think Nová is New and Stara is Old so  
you must be New Old, which I think my wife, who has had to imagine living  
as a kind of not-living (which is also fucked).  
And here I must stop and acknowledge, Reader, I am committing another crime  
here in my analogy between the Staranová Synagoga and my wife,  
the holocaustic history and my love's history, but  
the end game in public monuments is not throwing  
one atrocity against another, weighing for which is worse, but  
in remembering (so hard) the memory and remembering-self are molten.  
And all of this is less to make an allegory of the Prague around me  
whose scarred heart and alternating architectures each attach  
to some atrocity in some time, which might somehow stand for  
what could be said of me, but  
more me mourning my absence from my house  
where (in three days) my wife will wake  
and say Happy Anniversary to my empty  
bed-side. Six thousand miles and six hours  
ahead, I will have already done the same.  
I'm sure some calculation could equate numerically  
Staranová's construction and a wedding anniversary spent apart, but  
that's someone else's job. Mine is to celebrate what makes  
two people or a person and their God know days when skulls (being or not)  
and hearts outnumber the cobblestones in a street  
and then know today, where I must stop again—  
Darling, you've given me a day more important than my birthday (and  
without resisting the oversentimental because  
there is no other way to say this)  
I love you I love you I love you.

Materials; or Revision

Desire is no price haggler, so when they found  
that rust-bucket truck and drove deep

into each other, that bed, their hauled bodies,  
they found that peering-through-for-sale-pages-feeling

the feeling when it's there; perfect thing and perfect need.  
He didn't expect that next morning to wake and wordlessly

re-receive his grandfather's hammer from her, in red satin ribbon,  
the one he'd given him to build the things of life—

a workbench, a book shelf, a house to house a family,  
or rather, to make his house fit his family.

She and him had been like Frost's "Home Burial" couple.  
How they'd beat each other with misunderstandings,

breaths smaller than the words required to build them— Love,  
she was saying in the giving, is the history of remodels.

## Poet Collaged

He'd never known a glassblower who worked in steel until she explained the move  
from solid to molten to skin thin to the crucially over-tangible point  
when even he could melt— When he walks into her apartment

and she tries to apologize about calling again she means she loves how a body can melt  
without heat and he must admit

what he's cut from himself  
to make himself a wrought iron table where his other editions come  
for beer and whiskey's bite, then erase.

Of course  
they'd met in a bar where he worked and of course they drank  
their hands together. This is, after all, a story worried  
about getting it right— He melts of his own accord, is kicked out of her accord,

so he steals her groceries,  
thin-sliced peppered turkey, one time deviled eggs, sometimes bread, bananas, and  
marmalade, but never, ever, her admission that she could try  
a medium between glass and steel.

Skin, he says,  
starts the switchbacks toward the devil's door and he can't fit  
that fact out the window and whoever she was or is or turns into in her whiskey  
mirror. She's made two thieves in blowing him a steel heart  
and when she holds it up for him  
to see, his blown-steel heart is a mold hollowed  
like the space between one and one. He told her once

of his earlier editions, the drinking with them over himself; the girl  
who found a knife's signature in his  
twenty-second edition's palm, when

Lucifer found a little leather square depicting Lucrece's rape  
in blood with his face stitched over Lucrece's

in the stomach of an edition whose teeth were  
busted out. Why Lucrece? she asked,  
why do you live yourself into fables.  
What next? Will you believe an edition of you is jumping over the moon?  
Lucrece, he said, isn't a fable it's a story about the self as a made thing that can be broken.

This is why she can't make him her medium, why she made his blown steel heart



so she could say his face is why she couldn't stop  
letting him have himself to himself— This is  
imprecise and since this is  
a worried story, it should be forgiven that this is what happens  
when someone in love tries to tell a story about love as if he wasn't the one in love.

Every story's she is a you and the he is a boy like me.

When your hand nests on my thigh,  
asking me to try just once more  
to say what we agreed up front we'd never learn to say,  
I remember  
steel and glass, paper and skin are unrelenting accidents.

## Confessional

My best friend's brother lost his virginity  
came home and cried because it wasn't good

she was a whore he'd asked casually to fuck  
as a sort-of-joke-like conversation starter, but

she said yes, so they did and then there were tears  
and the knowing a girl can change a boy without

warning and there was when I dated a virgin who said  
she was tired of being a virgin and wanted to

get it over with, and we were almost-drunk on  
vodka and sycamore trees and she kissed me and

kept kissing until she threw up the wine she'd been  
drinking before the vodka and there were tears

and no more dates and the knowing that first times  
are first times for a reason and one summer I sat

outside for three days while the cicadas crawled  
after seventeen years in the ground to each other

within hours of arriving and I thought this is a better  
way to let the body do what it wants without asking

even though I was sitting outside a girl's window  
hoping she'd decide her window could be interpreted

as a door into me, which is never the case because  
the eye is the only acceptable entrance and people aren't

equipped to be looked at, which is the bitch of looking  
or rather, the bitch of looking is the seeing which is

what happens when, for instance, you stand across  
the room or street or up in a balcony-like window

and see the other and know you don't want to be  
the other. I see now why so many have said

all's fair in love and war because you across from me's  
both and I know the line's fragile as a guitar string

that strings an instrument I don't know how to play  
which is the story of boys and their bodies.

Last night I told a woman I had been drinking  
which meant I was drunk and hoped to see her

from half-way around the world and she said  
call me when you're sober which means she wasn't

in the mood for a story about anyone  
before her. Maybe she meant I have no history.

Maybe she meant goodnight goodnight silly one  
the wine's made its talk and night is a lover who knows

how to kiss. Maybe she was listening to Prince  
and I should've asked her to dance into oblivion but

this is all speculation improbable as the night  
I stood in line for a bagel with cheese turned

to the girl next to me and asked if she'd like a kiss.  
Sure why not she said and we laid some on each other.

I called her ten minutes later and five after that  
found her place and myself in it and her mouth

on mine. When she said should we go all the way  
I remembered a Frank O'Hara poem about sharing

a coke and I said it to her this girl who knew how to give  
a kiss or a thousand and she looked at me seeing in that

way only a woman can who's known boys as thieves and  
drunkards introducing themselves as stories they haven't written.

## Poet in a Denim Jacket Pretending to be a Poet

She puts on  
Cyndi Lauper and The Goonies  
to be the smokes they'd smoke  
if the store wasn't two blocks  
too far to walk in the dark. Something about  
the way Cyndi makes boys wanna have fun when she says  
girls  
wanna have  
fun reminds the young poet  
Europeans love Levi's or maybe  
it's her jeans' tag next to his head,  
his hope nothing changes when their pockets wear  
through, weathered years, whatever young men  
and

Juliets  
think coming days will bring. In a cafe  
yesterday, they overheard an older couple  
looking back  
on their lives. The gentleman said something  
about the book of life. I hate that metaphor, the young man said,  
my story's forgetting, that way I'm never a book.  
Tell me,

the young girl  
said, how we met. Oh, he said, you knew  
what you were doing when you put on  
that paper skirt  
and I happened to be in the bar, and you  
read my mind when you said I looked like I needed  
company. We talked for hours  
and

we happened  
to be seeing other people  
who weren't at the bar and our talking happened  
to make us  
not want to talk to them anymore. Quick as that.  
Just us without a past. And here we sit.  
See,



Enargeia

She knows. She knows he wants. Her  
    looking in the mirror before leaving suggests  
        she does as well, opening drawers for shirts,

taking the paper skirt off its hook.  
    Waking is enough to know the body  
        craves touch one way or another depending

how a moment reveals itself. She was once  
    a marionette, once a dictator. She must've  
        wished like everyone to be a doctor or farmer.

Point. Counter-point. This whole evening—  
    not a moth to a flame, but a hanging paper  
        lantern. And then the wind.

## Defense of Poetry IV

You've spotted him in the restaurant.  
Sometimes alone, sometimes the table's heart  
  
as he unfolds, folds, sets the menu down. He thinks  
appetizers, like Springsteen songs, have thinned,  
  
into starters— just enough so one wants more.  
Probably somebody realized people walk  
  
into restaurants because they're already hungry,  
not to sit and become hungry. But, he supposes,  
  
they could. Why not? Why not stroll in and sit  
down, declare, Nothing now thank you,  
  
I'm going to work up a craving for something  
while I check out this literature? He'll open  
  
the menu. Why not? Why not mull it over?  
Mull over everyone in the place?  
  
You've seen him looking up from the table  
or over his shoulders. You can't tell where  
  
he wishes he was or if he's fine there.  
He looks familiar, like the deer you almost felled  
  
last winter in the woods, the deer you held  
in your crosshairs, but couldn't shoot because  
  
the trees were ripe with bark. Don't overthink it,  
you said to yourself. A deer wouldn't  
  
make a decision. A deer would know  
what it wanted when it walked into the dusk.  
  
What did you want when you walked in here?  
His table is clean. His menu is wearing  
  
at the creases, a pair of jeans pulled on then off  
again, like worry or insomnia. You're staring

at yourself in the window. What do you want?  
Maybe you should offer yourself a beer. Maybe

you should flip yourself the bird. You could,  
though, look straight into your eyes, recite

Mark Strand's "Breath" again for the thousandth time  
because you're alone and that poem's a pillow

on a bed of piled concrete chips. You could say  
the poem straight into your eyes in the window's

night-shine, a million headlights blinking through  
your bloodstream, your hummingbird heart.

You've waited long enough and now you need.



IV.

## Poet Frantic and Vulnerable

I am running down the street. I am like Michael Jackson wearing  
one glove on the one hand holding  
the recorder that's recording  
the words my mouth makes between breaths  
which are coming heavier and heavier like what comes alongside a waterspout  
I see out in the gulf from the beach where I stand  
inside my head without realizing I'm in my head.

The waterspout's there spinning and twirling. I'm hearing Elton John's  
"Tiny Dancer." Hold me closer I'm yelling to myself  
as the wind becomes strong enough I'm aware all the wind's tiny  
atoms are pushing against my tiny atoms and there's nothing atomically different  
between me and the wind. There is nothing between me and the wind.

I am inside the wind inside the waterspout in my head. I am screaming Yeats.  
How can we know the dancer from the dance? I am screaming  
in that wind so strong the words fall out of my mouth and blow back  
behind me faster than the speed of sound.

## Confession of the Poet who Brought Books into a Public Restroom

I've rung the tower's bell for so long now  
I don't know anymore if hands are knots  
or if I'm hanging on by choice. I've been  
wanting a pen fast as my heart in those  
nine-alarm moments. Once I invented  
a character I described as "too hard  
and fast" and it felt better erasing  
the "I" and writing "Wilmot," but I still  
don't know if I meant "I" or "John Wilmot,

Second Earl of Rochester," whom I love.  
I read all his letters. I keep reading  
all these poems about poems and poets and  
trying to become what I read, as if  
I am convinced that's how a real poem's made.  
Everything in this life happens so fast.  
Even my shits come on like wildfire and  
next I know I'm checking on that wood-glue  
joint I clamped last night while trying to say  
out loud all the poets' names I know so

I can know I know enough. Honestly,  
I've been trying for years to get a shit  
into a poem because Liam Rector's  
"I Get a Feeling," showed me how to turn  
a phrase, but now that I've finally done it,  
I realize "I Get a Feeling" is about poems,  
becoming okay with this life. Today  
I opened Gerald Stern's *Paradise Poems*  
thinking I'd try a different perspective

on paradise, and there's Stern writing his  
"In Memory of W.H. Auden,"  
turning some bum sleeping on the street grilles  
in New York City into Ovid and  
himself. Gerald, you know so much about  
Ovid that your poem makes me feel like I'm  
just some asshole for trying to make poems  
transcending time and place, space, religion.

For shit's sake, look at me, this pity party  
because I might be poetry's asshole.  
Because I can't tell if I'm more, or less  
connected to you, Gerald because once  
I saw a Bleeker Street sign in New York,  
or because I say over and over  
to everyone I know that I don't know  
enough to see Ovid's incarnation  
on the street, like you, which is why your poem's

a Paradise Poem and mine's still obsessed  
with shit. Remember when you wrote Ovid's  
become his own sad poem?" How did you know?  
It's happening to me right now, isn't it?  
Gerald, did you really mean Ovid or  
did you mean you? How did you not become  
your own sad poem? Is that paradise? Is  
there any way to know it but to keep  
imagining it's beyond this poem and

into the next, like the best restroom-stall  
graffiti? Gerald, were you comfortable  
sitting between Rome and New York, ancient  
and modern, all the noises? Did you know  
Liam Rector? Did you "get a feeling  
of discomfort, pressure?" Did you feel that  
"pressure to be a good person?" Poet?  
Did you "wait for the feeling and then when

It [did come] do its bidding? That feeling,  
Liam says, is like taking a shit? Or,  
like him, "on a very good day" did you  
not "much give a shit about that?" I am  
in a restroom stall trying to follow  
all the scrawled voices that feel connected,  
but I can't stand up, burst into the next  
stall to see where the conversation goes.  
I'm stuck here, crouched between knowing and not,

between urges making me animal,  
and this feeling, this discomfort I feel  
I'm almost ready to pass as human—

## Defense of Poetry V

The therapist says problem is a problematic word.  
It assumes too much. Sure, some problems are agreed upon,  
generally, by a majority. Murder is a problem, extortion, starvation—  
The list is long. One's tempted to say, and getting longer, but  
human nature's not inventing anything new.  
Is a problem a problem if it can't be solved?  
I've never understood why anyone wants to watch  
a television show claiming mysteries are solvable.  
It's no mystery who put a knife through whom's chest  
how many times. It's an unsolvable. It's the reason  
I call home when I'm not home. Even this is not a problem.  
One can imagine a world full of knives and screaming skin,  
and one can imagine something else, which presents us with  
a real problem: "The greatest natural genius cannot subsist  
on its own stock; he who resolves never to ransack any mind  
but his own, will soon be reduced, from mere bareness, to  
the poorest of all imitations." The charge is not to imitate  
ourselves? Where do we go so we can't see our face? How  
can we see something new in eyes as old as time?

Because there are Nights that Seem to Put One Arm First

Because there are nights that seem to put  
one arm first on a ladder toward day

and then a foot back on the ground as if  
the indecision's deeper than definitive.  
Because we learn first to smile in sleep before

the lips carve out the inside in daylight. Because  
daylight can be carved out of the mind, as in

a silhouette, my son's.  
There is his mouth, which cannot say a word,  
but works against the light, a stage's scrim, as if

the inside were a chorus chanting low harmonies  
barely hearable, bearable, less audible than palpable,

the curtain pulling back to show the players playing  
and the players playing their own thanks—  
I've talked for years about essay as a derivative

of assay—to talk—as if the essay were a conversation,  
a response to something else external, but Montaigne

meant “essais” as “attempts”—take away  
the thesis, take away the logic and rhetoric,  
strip away what's thought-through and there is only

that thing felt, maybe even before the feeling  
becomes an idea. I gave my wife a dozen yellow roses

before she was my wife, before I knew  
I loved her because I believed I would love her.  
I didn't know Aristotle believed a smile showed the soul.

My son sits sleeping in his mother's arms  
against the window's light and something pulls

to one side his lip, suggesting he's happy,  
that something's right in there  
where there are no definitions

or logic, just the thing I keep  
walking through days trying to get back.

I used to think flowers were fireworks  
for celebrating the dark not eating me.  
I hope that I was wrong. I hope

flowers are flags of happiness, like smiles,  
that from a distance are bright as trying

to make poems on a dark sea that's never dark  
except to those who've imagined  
their way into light. I've wanted tonight

to describe my child's smile.  
I've sat and watched him sleep for hours.

## Image

If I was honest with myself, I'd be able to admit  
I wish Whitman's portrait could be my self-portrait,  
that Whitman's ghost is real as me.

Some months back I read Whitman was obsessed  
with pictures produced by a camera; the machine  
able to capture a moment's difference in a man.

Tonight my wife and I hung the bird feeders  
my mother gave us, who loves birds, who  
often takes pictures of those both rare and not-so-rare

appearing like little visions in the yard.  
Many birders handle the hobby in like manner.  
I suspect my wife and I also will.

Our pictures will try so hard to make clear  
we know a moment's value; the breath-taking startle  
scuttled by a scarlet warbler or the ping-pong-ball-tail wren's

happy-go-lucky-ho-hum-hop-around-the-porch morning.  
Perhaps the oriole won't return next year. The blue bird  
might find a better store of shelled, halved, peanuts.

If I was honest with myself, I'd admit  
I'm not convinced, so much, anymore,  
my captured moments are like any of these ghosts,

their stories like the pileated  
woodpecker that flew before

the shutter's click, and  
flash that changes everything.



## Sublime Prayer

—After Edmund Burke

The duende calls  
one to sea  
or to stand  
for a stranger's  
honor. The duende  
reaches inside,  
grabs below  
the heart,  
deeper, deep  
in the self  
I don't know  
I have. The duende  
takes its time,  
reaches so deep  
with fingers  
closing into  
a fist grabbing  
pulling out  
what it took  
so long to reach  
to grasp. My body  
feels weightless,  
a pain's so great  
my legs fall away,  
my torso's there  
floating in fear  
of its collapse  
and my mouth  
prays out loud  
for the duende  
below my heart,  
to the duende  
pulling me along  
through dirt streets,  
graveled self,  
a gallows where  
every hanging  
skeleton gives  
one bone and  
one bone only  
to the duende

travelling inside  
me who'll take  
from my past  
one bone from each  
skeleton inside  
my head, the gallows  
where I pray  
inconsolably  
to the duende  
for new legs,  
so I might stand  
in one place.  
If I could only  
stand in one place  
on my own legs,  
feel the ground,  
its grass, or rocks,  
its thorns, dead leaves.  
If only mouth  
and legs could  
be in the same  
place, dear duende,  
and sing peace,  
so my body  
could be quiet,  
the mountain  
I've imagined  
standing before  
for years. Those sheer,  
ancient faces  
inside waiting.  
Dear duende help me  
collapse.

## Rhinoceri

We can agree there is a time for honesty  
and then there is a time for honesty.

This is one of those times. Honestly,  
that night on my parents' roof after  
we'd bought the condoms and made  
our pacts and you asked if I was ready

I said yes, that I was all yours, but  
I didn't tell you I couldn't quit thinking of  
the National Geographic I'd perused

that morning in the can, the rhinoceri  
about to die from drought so I herded them  
from Africa into my virginity's history.

I've come to know them as the way  
I know something important's going  
to happen, go out the window, or jump a horse.

And again they're here in this, doing  
whatever rhinos do when they aren't dying.  
I've burnt up shadows staring into myself,

the sun on the Serengeti. I thought you  
a sky alive with birds of paradise, even  
when the rhinoceri first came to me and

even when afterward you said I couldn't love,  
not really, because I was only seventeen—  
I never was angry for that until yesterday,

drinking on a street café's deck. I am  
sitting with friends, a man and a woman.  
Another woman walks up and sits with us.

The new woman offers herself to my friend  
who promptly says my other friend is his  
girlfriend. The new woman lowers her price.

Bellowing rhinos surround me, rhinos  
not dying of drought. The new woman understands  
and starts to stand to leave but falls over

drunk in the road. She refuses my hand  
to help her up, out of shame, mine or hers,  
who knows. The rhinos are here and charging

for the grace a boy in love deserved. Rhinoceri  
believe in a golden age for love. The new  
woman tells my friends no one can buy

what she saw between them, she's tried  
for years to drink her heart's lake. I want  
to say I scooped her up, a silver stallion

crossing the plain, herding the rhinos, that  
there was no time to fashion a saddle  
or make declarations in the night,

that we and the rhinos set off for every mirage.  
The new woman's plot made me want  
to cry. I am again in the can, reading the walls,

wishing all these names are somewhere  
scratching their bellies and backs against rocks and trees.  
The rhinos are standing in the rain.

## Twenty-Something Poet Making a Mix Tape

I cut my hair with a knife so I could be a knight.  
I went to the river so I would smell like a man  
who can handle the whole world. I was  
a knight with armor on the inside, a lion's  
hunger mixed with a bull elephant's thirst.  
She kneeled on one knee and proposed; will you,  
my full name, take me to bed tonight? I asked  
if she loved me. She asked if I'd made a mix tape.  
Yes, I said, and she said yes. I had built  
the music box whose one song was the song  
sung in the sound a deer's tongue makes lapping  
the river's edge; the song born of Aphra Behn and  
Whitman, perfected by PM Dawn and Prince, Otis  
Redding, Michael Jackson, Madonna. We made out  
like teenagers in the hallway. We were *Rent's*  
"No Day But Today" and *West Side Story's* "Maria."  
We sang all the mix tape's songs, songs written by  
knights and ladies for the kind of night happening once  
a knight trades armor and opponents for the dance-  
floor and feasting the movies and old books make  
tilt or battle days out to be. Everything accorded  
to the laws of boys, the laws of all of us afraid  
we might have sex. She and I sang songs of  
ourselves. We stopped singing long enough for me  
to grope my pocket for a condom, then we sang again.  
We were housesitting for our professor whose teen son  
slapped me five on his way out; she was on her way in.  
The old condom in the palm transfer, a practice  
between brothers of a certain shield, boy-law's bylaws.  
Her and I were spinning dancers on the night's  
music box wound for the long song, the longest  
song imaginable so I took a chance on a solo,  
a call with no response, a soliloquy scream stopping  
her screaming. I screamed I couldn't feel her or  
me. The play no longer the thing. Just screaming  
and understanding why boys are afraid of nights  
like that. I was a b-boy bucking. She flicked on the light.  
I've never seen a thin-sized condom, she said, but suppose  
it makes sense. She got some ice and her poetry anthology.

She read Rochester's "Imperfect Enjoyment," then Donne and Wyatt, excerpts from *Paradise Lost*. Quintessential lovers, she said, are always fucked, the trying to love, a fiasco bigger than love itself.

## The Key

-After Mark Strand

If I walk in and find another man  
sitting at the table with my wife,  
    I will serve myself the cacciatore  
    and talk with them about their day.

If I walk in and find this other man  
playing Monopoly with my children,  
    I will ask who is the banker?  
    And hope the thimble is not taken.

If I walk in and find the other man  
lying naked in my bed,  
    I will kiss my wife  
    and undress to lie with them.

I see, in the mirror, evidence  
that I too will hold the man, and hope  
    he gives to me what he gives  
    to her. There is no other way

to say I love you. No time like this.

## For a Poet Who Fears His Elegies are too Sentimental

This winter has weighed and  
judged you, told you you cannot  
escape your mother's death, the poems

in which she lives and is gone already or  
again. This winter has swaddled you  
in sweaters of brown paper, made you

eat of yourself from your own store  
when you have spent every penny buying  
yourself from yourself and then stealing.

Aren't we always damning the seasons  
for making us thief ourselves? This winter  
also married you, though, and marriage is its own

kind of season in which you must steal  
from yourself to give all of yourself or  
so is said, but after I was married

I told my wife she was my everything and  
she said she is not my skin or the air,  
that she couldn't feed me without food.

I've hated her and loved her more for that.  
We knew ourselves first as sons and then  
as husbands— not preferencing here,

just chronological truth. Maybe  
truth is the link here. Maybe  
we are jealous of mothers and wives

who say what we're always stealing  
to try and say. This winter, then,  
has kept you honest about the burden

of boy poets in the weather of the internal  
universe. This winter, then, because syntax,  
expectation, is heavy, because my elegy for yours



is less elegy and more praise for your trying,  
I believe now it is possible for boy poets  
to be born and raised on the words we need.

Defense of Poetry VI; or Poet Expected Home

Christmas, again, and mother you're weeping  
    like the Virgin weeps in story, paint, concrete and marble,  
        whatever else artists' or sculptors' hands make weep

in the faithful's hearts— The mother is always left.  
    Such is the story of sons trading womb for womb for womb.  
        But the Virgin's stories aren't chiding the son

for spending a holiday—in part— with another father.  
    Son's are born by leaving, Mother, you've known this.  
        I have stayed a boy after years walking through girls

and women and laying down so they could walk on me  
    When I married you said welcome to the family, meaning  
        your family, without acknowledging the family welcoming me.

You named me for a man I've never known  
    who was my grandfather who was named for Christ  
        and strictly speaking, this conversation about how much

time I'll spend where and how exactly and when exactly  
    I'll arrive home to celebrate my birth feels less like mass  
        and more like I'm holding Dante's hand after he's installed

an escalator in hell for those who need to get there quick.  
    When in August you asked about our Christmas plans  
        I opened first a beer then the whiskey making my devil sing

and I sang after we hung up. I sang songs I pray  
    my mouth won't sing again. My devil sang and sang.  
        Symphosius' twelfth riddle says There is an earthly house

which sounds with a clear note, a tone, and  
    the house itself makes music but contains a silent guest  
        and both hurry onward, guest and house together—

Ars Poetica

I've been sulking around the house  
wringing my hands inside my chest  
like some old weatherman  
certain the big storm's coming today,  
the one that'll blow us all away  
with whatever wrath you believe in.  
If you ask me how I am, I'll tell you  
my recent life's story, which is ridiculous.  
Yesterday, for instance, I found a dead mole  
in the driveway. Nice job, cat, I thought, then  
remembered the star-nosed mole I caught  
years ago. I put the mole in the plastic aquarium  
I'd used to kill a Siamese fighting fish.  
I gave the mole grass and leaves, some twigs  
and watched him for two days. I named him  
Frightful. I never saw him move,  
except his little ribs heaving like a coal miner's.  
I pressed my face to the plastic, staring  
into those mineshaft eyes. I was sure  
he was scared of me, but I don't remember  
if I felt like God or like I thought God might feel.  
I remember the body, though,  
after I'd stared him to death,  
how it bounced in the grass on the third day.  
I remembered yesterday when I flicked that mole

with my shoe's tip into the road, the traffic  
like a life's-full of guilt. What I carry

in my chest is never of my choosing,

so the stories I tell are always the same,  
why my prayers keep begging for words

to let me re-write my own endings, or

at least imagine the possibility, a sunrise  
on the horizon I can't see in the dark.

V.

## Water Skiing with Robert Creeley

I hold various headshots I've cut from my own photographs over your face  
just to feel the wind blowing a few of your curls,  
that little outboard's vibration under your hand on that lake  
(at least I imagine it a lake) when I take your *Selected Poems* off the shelf.

Isn't power a weird thing? The boat's wake suggests some decent speed.  
Sometimes I imagine if you sneezed right as Bruce Jackson snapped that photo  
and your head bent down, I'd be back there in the middle of the wake  
slalom skiing, waving one hand in the air.

People would wonder if I was waving at the camera or to you and Bruce.  
Maybe I'd be about to put a thumb up or down as if to say speed on or slow now,  
the water's rougher than it looks but nobody can tell because  
Robert Creeley's driving a boat, having his picture taken, and probably writing

a poem in his head or at least thinking to himself this experience will become  
a poem. I mean, really, how often does anyone drive a boat without looking, while posing  
and pulling a skier? Nobody I know's ever done it. And I know a lot of people.  
I'm sorry that I'm writing this to you in a present that is and isn't yours.

But I wasn't smart enough to know you before now. I'm still not, but Art Smith was  
smart enough to tell me to buy your poems because he knew they would be good for me.  
Like William Carlos Williams saying "there, and there" to you  
because "what one wants is / what one wants, yet complexly" as you say he said.

When I read your poems, especially the early ones, I feel like I'm skiing behind you  
into a whale's mouth. What a stunt it is to live, you say, when I climb into the tiny boat.  
You pat my back, hand me a pen, paper, and bottle. Nobody'll believe us about this whale,  
you say, and the paper's not waterproof, but trust'll get it where it needs to go.

## Cross-Genre

A mirror separating  
Men's and Women's clothes

reminds me I've been standing  
too long in Target, how

I used to squeeze my face  
between the couch and carpet

to whisper all the cusswords  
a twelve year old knows

how to say, but not use,  
but I knew they meant upset,

or frustration, or how nothing  
turns out exactly as we want.

Wanting, on one hand, to desire.  
On the other, to be lacking.

Somehow I'm riddled with both.  
I am my own poem in revision

and everything in this store's  
so close to the specifics I need

to let me believe I'm human,  
which means riddled with lack

and desire, like a kid making do  
inside a blouse rack

whose mother likely said  
she'd be five minutes

an hour ago— death's kiss  
for any kid talked into

Saturday morning errands.  
In the mirror I see the boy

staring at me: a pack of ribbed Hanes,  
a deck broom, the new sheet set

my wife's been saying we need  
each time she clips out coupons.

Can you read? I ask the boy. Yes.  
Then read this, I say, and scribble

underneath my list, I have slipped into  
the title of poet, I want to hate

my unelected vocation, your believing  
you can be what you want.



## Defense of Poetry VII; or Remember that Fight with the Feminist

who heard me call you my woman? How she stopped and said how dare you?! And I said, I know what you're thinking: *Woman! He called her woman! HIS! WOMAN!* but let me tell you how I celebrate her, my woman, let me tell you

my woman is my woman because she says so, because she says I'm your woman  
then she turns into the morning. I wake up drink from her eyes like pitchers full with coffee  
pour my songs out in the sun like a hippopotamus wallows in mud

and I sing my woman is my woman because she wants to be my woman  
then she becomes an acorn. I watch her in a squirrel's hands, he doesn't know what to do  
with this woman, he doesn't know how to crack this nut.

I know it's because she's my woman. She tells him. She says Squirrel I'm his  
woman not your nut but we can both climb an oak and realize eating is like sinking in love,  
digging in a jelly-filled donut's middle, a stomach, a den, a home.

Squirrel, that's why I'm his woman; because he's got a belly and it's growing  
and he doesn't expect mine to unless I want it to, unless I say it's okay  
then she's gone. Not the wind, but in the wind; something I can't see

and then my skin stands up like static electricity's in the vicinity  
we're having coffee in the back yard, croissants, she's telling me about work  
and wearing the short shorts she only wears at home. Her legs are crossed  
and she is is something! Something to look at! And I'm looking and she says Darling

I'm your woman because you like to look in my head. My eyes leave her legs,  
her pupils are quicksand. I'm sucked in. I'm inside and upside down. I see myself  
as a trick-or-treat sack dumped on a table. She sorts me into piles, picks her favorites,

eats till she's happy, and I'm happy inside her stomach. Then it's bedtime.  
I'm born like a moment next to her skin like the nightshirts she wears because they're hand-  
combed-cotton. I talk her to sleep saying she is how the seasons change, she is why

Earth looks like Eden from the moon, and she is my woman who lets me be  
her partner she is why I'm able to wake always dancing and singing dancing and  
singing like a goose who mates for life.

## Defense of Poetry VIII

In the time I've read and lost Rilke's *Book of Images*, generations of ants have come and gone, the river birch we planted last year's grown shaggy like a teenaged boy in his old-man's eyes—

Get a job, mine used to say, Get a wife and don't lie to her about anything. You're lucky enough if she wants to marry you. Don't go thinking your luck will get any better.

I remember my old-man saying that. I remember the nail going through the sole of my foot and Kangaroo shoe, then the good burn as peroxide took the tetanus away. I remember

being in the same shoes as every kid who wonders how they'll know when they're grown up. I remember looking at the hardened, pretty adults, wanting their value, their seeming rarity.

Oysters make pearls because sand scares them. If the world is my oyster, what is my pearl? My wife is pregnant so I have been thinking what a son or daughter should know first about the world.

Then I become worried I don't mean the world. Really, I mean what a son or daughter should know about me and what I think is the world. That there's so little time scares me the most. Since I read and lost Rilke's

*Book of Images*, I keep thinking of that one line in the middle of that poem in the middle: as the evening unbuttons its blouse or something close to that, my God.

I wish I could tell you the title. For the life of me. What an image to be made in, an evening unbuttoning its blouse as if an evening were a woman or a man wearing a blouse, as if an evening can be stepped into like a life.

## Defense of Poetry IX; or Love Prayer

The quiche is on the stove cooling, now  
probably growing cold, the way food does  
at room temperature when we're most hungry—  
something about the physics of it all— or  
another theorem I've known and forgotten,  
Newton, maybe, I don't know, anticipation  
and reaction, feeling without and fulfilled, how  
I can think of sitting next to you at room temperature  
and I'm not cold, but the quiche feels frigid  
in the same air, the same mouth. We're always saying  
we'll make time for each other and I'm so thankful  
you put on that green thing I love to love you in.  
That green thing like all the rainforests leaves  
pouring their hold over me. The quiche over there  
has almost got me upset. My hunger. Its quiet  
consternation. There are times I want to claim  
even my books are against me, but that's just easier  
than admitting I'm lonely up here in the kitchen  
while you're down with the sleepless baby,  
all green with life. I don't think it'd be out of line  
to say a little prayer that when he's off and dreaming  
we'll be green with living, our bones green embers,  
neither of us giving a damn about a quiche.

## The Poet Thinking He's Milton's Adam

I can't be the only one waking up  
thinking I'm Adam looking down at my  
hand in Eve's, clouds rumbling, the Miltonic

narrator: The world was all before them,  
I can't be the only one scared shitless  
imagining that first night outside the

garden I've always imagined Eden  
atop a grassy hill taller than all  
the way Red Cross Knight sees that bright city

on the hill, and I've always imagined  
the world outside just as lush as inside  
and Adam and Eve hand in hand atop

the tallest hill in history looking  
out across the forests and fields below  
thinking they'd lost something despite having

gained the whole rest of the world. Imagine  
what they must have thought looking up, seeing  
the fallen sky for that first time? Broken?

How many nights I have stood out under  
the black believing Adam and I share  
the same anxieties, how to listen

to the maker, and trust the maker's made  
a contingency plan for those of us who need  
to listen, learn how and why our maker

made us, how far, exactly, free will goes.  
What could Adam have thought of those night lights  
without Milton's narrator telling him

what to think— I hope he thought to wish on  
one of them, or all of them, but how can  
a man muster a wish out loud, or not, when

his maker's made himself known and cast him out?  
I can't be the only one whose been out  
in the night, two hands opened toward heaven

screaming "if I can't make it with my own  
hands, if the lean-to leans to the ground, and  
the Solomon Seal's all I know to eat,

I'll make it if this world's a wilderness  
with room for those who'll give themselves to it.  
Maker, don't let me be the only one

who stands out under your stars praying  
all the lights I see are others who've lived  
by listening to all the words you've made.

VI.

## Defense of Poetry X; or Prayer

Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, "Here doth lie  
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."  
—Ben Jonson

Like so many millions of praying mantises, I am  
in a doorway, in a near field, in a leaf nest waiting

out the deluge of guilt carried in everyone's elbows  
who's let rote memory go astray during vespers.

This is not a plea for redemption. This is not  
a plea for restitution, though it is a thought moving

toward such a thought. Ben Jonson, I presume  
you're familiar with what is, what was, and

what shall be because you said your son was  
your best piece of poetry. Father, I presume

you're familiar with Ben Jonson because we have  
psalms, and poems, and record of a life spared

in 1598 by virtue of literacy. Ben Jonson, Father,  
you spared his life because he could read and so plead

benefit of clergy. Benefit to me, a member of the reading  
public. Poetry from Poesis: Making, the act

or process. Fiction: Proceeding from invention  
and all the ways men find to try and say that thing.

Help me read a past strewn with what can be  
read as coincidence and not-coincidence, what

can be construed as something more than those  
words that place people and people in the same space

at the same time. No two things can occupy  
the same space. Poetry and Fiction, Father.

Ben Jonson's Ben Jonson. What is your son,  
Ben Jonson? A fiction or a making? A process?

So many hours of my life are indented in church pew-backs,  
like semi-colons to another world, where I straddled

one foot in and one foot out asking and asking  
for a clean slate, for a life unending, for the perfect words

in the perfect prayer. My wife and child will be  
well and one and I will watch his tiny hands work

through the air, hear exhaustion's exuberant moans.  
Hold my son close. What I can't imagine and never stop.



## After Mary Oliver

It's ludicrous, really, the idea of the famous poet,  
as if a generation's or moment's cloaked in verse,  
as if a poet anywhere in any time could be  
the unacknowledged, but acknowledged legislator  
of the world. What would that mean? All the world's  
people moving through days and nights following the laws  
of a pen they won't or can't acknowledge as the writer of their lives?  
It sounds like church, like the years I opened doors with only my right  
hand because they told me Jesus sat at the father's right hand and  
I was right handed so I might be Jesus come back  
after all this time to judge the living and the dead. Isn't the famous  
poet the one who judges this universal life, deciding what's in  
and what's out?— And maybe poems about poems have become  
taboo as poets say louder and louder that poetry can save the world?  
I used to believe that when the world was as big as a Friday night  
in a T-top Camaro doing eighty-five in a forty. Didn't we all  
pick up the pen for some vainglory? A hand on a thigh, a tear  
on the tongue, because we believed in immortality? I ran  
into hell because love is hell (or a dog from hell if you ask  
Bukowski). Beatrice was a moth on a tree trunk. If Virgil  
would've spoke to me I would've become a burnt corpse barge  
across the river Styx. I was different than everyone. I was  
Jesus, maybe, or somebody else worth recording. If anyone  
would've said, "properly attended to, delight, as well as havoc,  
is suggestion," I would only have known language as a granted.  
Dear Mary Oliver, you asked if one can "be passionate about  
the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit  
to no labor in its cause." I give thanks my living is writing;  
the labor. "Be ignited, or be gone," you say. What an ordeal  
to imagine eternal fire. Most run from it, straight to prayer.  
Prayer is what I do when I don't know, or rather in a poem  
it's the way I ask the sky to sing.

## Poet Making

—For Michael C. Peterson

If it's cool with everybody, I'm gonna get ripped right now he said  
and flicked a square or doobee off the porch like  
a mother humpback who knows it's time for something else for her,  
for her baby, for every whale in the mix.

We took pictures later when he fell asleep and off  
the shitter. He had just been trying to piss in the night  
around friends and the imagined fire everybody feels

when it's been a long time since a friend's been seen,  
hugs given, talk moving like confetti when there's an occasion  
big enough to require little paper squares cut or bought or found

in the back alley of some mind's street saying yeah,  
yeah that's what this night needs, confetti like a million okay's  
raining down, like a trillion words meaning you are  
the brother my mother wasn't able to make and couldn't  
because some brothers aren't meant to be born in the same room.

I put on Mazzy Star so everybody would cry  
because it's one in the morning and you've asked me to be your second  
at thunder road, because when everybody said, "hold on man,  
there's somebody here you should meet who looks like you who sounds  
like you who is who you've been needing to talk to about poems

as a little worlds, a cosmos, a thing born in the body  
and exploding a billion trillion times into what we all know you're looking for,  
that somebody to sit on a porch painted green and yellow,  
that somebody who's gonna understand the demons you say live

in your eyes and right hand as it writes those parts of you you can make,  
that dude who's gonna say, "we need to walk out in that field  
and if we come back, we come back, and if we come back,  
we'll walk into wherever, and nothing will be different for anyone else,

but we'll be okay with night's promise that there is dark  
and there is dark and we're a part of it all.

## On Making a Metaphor

-for Sarah Rose and Michael

I'm tempted to try and say what it is that marriage means or what love means, but everyone in love knows love means whatever those in love make it mean, which is why I cannot talk simply about Michael and Sarah Rose's love nor can I try and give advice because advice would imply I know what I'm doing and anyone in love knows that loving and being loved is a way of being that moves from second to second or hour to hour. So I cannot offer much in the way of advice. The difficulty in addressing newly-weds, then, is most about the addressing itself, what words we choose to make fit in a way that might mean something to those who've just stood in or outside a barn (weather-depending) and answered Whitman's question—What is it that frees me so in storms? What do my shouts amid lightnings and raging winds mean? Of course the answer is love and of course Whitman wasn't actually standing amid lightnings and raging winds. He was standing inside himself and someone else, he was making a metaphor, which is what love-talkers have always understood about love— that the best way to address newly-weds is to find that perfect metaphor. Sarah Rose, you once wrote of Possible Names For A Country House. Among the possibilities you proposed A hole to place your excellent heart, Everything on the human scale, Acorn stash, and One hundred Christmases. Michael, you have written that It was the way she was or wasn't looking, the *it* being something akin to Whitman's storm. So what do I say now? I'm tempted to make you both into what Sarah Rose might call a country house. You both are holes to place your excellent hearts in, you are each other's acorn stashes, you feel together everything on the human scale, you are each other's one hundred Christmases. All of these are right, but taken singly, can't hold what I stood for this afternoon. I'm tempted, then, to make you both the looker or not looker from Michael's line and say the *it* that prompted this engagement is what happens when words fail and two people rely only on what is felt, but this too, though right, feels imprecise. Perhaps I should make this afternoon's event into

a piece of sea-glass where one of you is the lightning  
and one of you is the sand and remind you  
of the conditions necessary to make the sky reach  
down to the beach in a gesture feeling much like  
a first kiss, the kind of kiss kissed when someone  
says you may kiss your bride. Such a metaphor  
feels fitting for today and is more precise than  
my earlier attempts to address you, but I have again  
failed because sea glass is a result, an object, and  
what you have made today is not a static thing, not  
merely an object I can name exactly. What you have  
made today is, though, exactly like a metaphor itself.  
Let me remind you that metaphors are how we poets make  
the world and ourselves new in any given moment. And  
let me remind you that a metaphor is made of three parts.  
Sarah Rose and Michael, you are two parts and you  
know each other as Sarah Rose and Michael, but this  
room full of people is here because of the third part,  
which is the thing you will be making each minute or hour  
from here on out, the thing that will keep being the new  
sort of reality that a metaphor makes and which cannot  
survive except at the intersection of your two perspectives.  
In this way a metaphor is turned into, not *a* truth,  
but *the* truth about the principle subject in question.

Poem in which I Give My Friend a Flower in Empathy that won't Wilt

He showed up and put his arms around me.  
I put mine around him. It had been a while.

Life had been happening. There were canyons  
gouging his eyes' corners, tar pits welling

under those cheeks usually so intricately involved  
in his laugh, so intricately absent from this arrival.

I remember when I was a kid, I told him,  
the Museum of Natural History's prehistoric exhibit.

Wooly mammoths and saber-tooth tigers—  
some standing around, some sinking into the tar pits.

I was balling. Hysterical. Why won't their friends help them  
I kept saying, demanding of my parents.

What'd they say? he said. They tried to explain the logistics.  
What else could they do? Can't teach life, I guess, or make it better.

Sometimes living's responsibility's too much for the living  
so we make symbols of hope we can share.

Come down to the stream with me.  
There's a trillium down there. It's red. I love it.

## The Poet Making A Scene

Two boys are practice-dancing shirtless  
on the lawn. A bicycle is chained to a rack for bikes.  
I called both Hallmarks in town and neither has the frame  
I was planning to give as a Father's Day gift.  
People fill the quad like they know what they're doing.  
All of these narratives seeing each other happen right here.  
And there's one guy in the middle of it all  
with a video camera. He's turning in circles like a narrator.  
This poem is in his movie. He doesn't know it.

He's just observing. His eye to the camera. The camera  
spinning slowly like a lighthouse. Here it comes again.  
I raise my hand, and he, as if startled, raises his, almost  
like a flinch at first. He wonders if he knows me,  
but he doesn't, and now he's packing up his camera, moving  
on, as if I'd taken something away by noticing him  
whose goal, it seems, was to notice everything else.  
I broke his narrative by looking back at the movie-maker.  
I am Spenser's Calidore interrupting Calepine making

*love to Serena, them much abasht, but more him selfe thereby,  
that he so rudely did upon them light, and  
troubled had their quiet loves delight. But I am also Calidore  
on his mission to kill Blatant Beast, that monster  
without boundaries, without control, who observes  
and inserts himself like the movie-maker. I am Calidore  
the hunter, taking up his quest, telling Artegall  
But where ye eneded have, now I begin  
to tread an endless trace, withouten guyde*

*or good direction how to enter in,  
or how to issue forth in waies untryde  
In perils strange, in labours long and wide.*  
But I am not Calidore believing a knight's errand original.  
I am not Calidore inserting myself into the world without  
regard for the world of which I'm part. I have a father  
and so acknowledge his father-ness by questing for a gift  
to celebrate his part in my world, to understand him as a maker  
whose guide was his father and all the fathers before him.

I see the shirtless boys practice dancing and see them making  
love to each other and to dance, the ways a body moves,  
like a lyric and a narrative. The art hiding itself so the emotion  
bellows blatantly out, filling a moment with what  
never before has filled a moment. I am not Calidore  
without a guide or good direction. I have Spenser,  
Calidore's maker, and all the poets between us.  
I have Spenser, who was his own allegory to show me  
I am always my own allegory, to help me see how

the heart races when it doesn't know how it should feel  
and how intricate to acknowledge the vigilance required  
to stay hidden from my narrative and admit I am its subject.

VII.



## Rote Memory

I've been making lists and believing in them.  
Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John writing the gospel,  
which our Deacon used to take down off the stand  
every Sunday, walking out into the church's middle.  
How many times I carried that bible for him,  
holding it while he read, feeling like God's vessel  
filled up and pouring over with the words  
falling out of Gordon's mouth, which was  
bearded and so much like God's. I think I  
believed what I was unable to believe otherwise—  
that sometimes it isn't at all what the words say.  
It's not what you say, it's how you say it, my wife's  
said to me a million times, but usually  
I just hear her say the words, not how  
she says them. When I carried the Deacon's bible  
I would try to follow along as he read to the people,  
but I was reading upside down and often just  
heard how he said what he said and the only words  
I remember him saying are "the gospel according to"—  
the "according to," I think being the operative.  
"Gospel" in the old and middle English means  
nothing like "law," but "good spell" instead,  
which is maybe why I felt a part of something  
outside myself from within. Spell, in this sense,  
"discourse or story." I don't know why  
I believed for so long the "who" in "according to"  
makes all the difference. Probably because I have to say  
and keep saying "I am not an earth, nor an adjunct  
of an earth. I am the mate and companion  
of all people, all just immortal and fathomless  
as myself. They do not know how immortal, but  
I know," because I'm teaching myself to unread  
all of my books, which I now open upside down.  
If you make a list of all the writers' names, I will  
recite how they make me breathe.

## Defense of Poetry XI; or The Poet Explaining Himself

I'd forgotten the moon last night would rise  
like most other nights because nights come, dark  
and droning on for hours while I'm scared  
I've forgotten how to make a sentence or  
because the moon's poetry's bright cliché,  
like when I tell someone I'm a poet—  
I just love that Billy Collins' poems, or  
I don't know anything about poetry—  
as if we're talking about zooplankton  
or what uranium's half-life might mean.  
Take the moon's picture tonight, I should say,  
show it to a stranger, ask do you see  
grief or grievance, joy or do we sometimes  
gamble for the impossible because?

## Notes

### “Defense Prayer”

Poem borrows and modifies the lines, “cartography through the silences,” “How do I exist?,” “If there is a poetry where this could happen,” and “not as blank spaces, / or whispers as words stretched like skin / over meanings, but as silence falls / at the end of a night through which two people have talked till dawn,” from Adrienne Riche’s “Cartographies of Silence” in *The Dream of a Common Language*.

### “Ode to Philip Sidney”

The line “but Ah! Desire still cries, give me some food” comes from Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil & Stella* Sonnet 71.

### “Love Poem”

The lines “rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling,” are taken from Adrienne Rich’s interview with Audre Lorde on August 30, 1979. The full interview can be found in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, edited by Joan Wylie Hall. “Ezra Pound, Ezra Pound, make it new, make it new” references Pound’s book by the same title.

### “Holdfast”

“Behind all this some great happiness is hiding” is taken from Yehuda Amichai’s poem “Memorial Day for the War Dead.”

### “The Unutterable Self”

The poem makes reference to, and borrows from, Wallace Stevens’ *The Man with the Blue Guitar*.

### “Defense of Poetry I; or Poem in which I can’t Imagine My Own Death”

This poem references and borrows lines from Jill Rosser’s “Revisiting the City of Her Birth,” Edward Hirsch’s poem “Special Orders,” and Mark Halliday’s poem “Chicken Salad.”

### “Every Time I Read ‘Some Trees’; or Dear John Ashbery”

This poem interacts with John Ashbery’s “Some Trees” and borrows the line “a canvas on which emerges a chorus of smiles.”

### “Poet Seeing Stars”

“Just like Heaven” appeared on The Cure’s album *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* released in 1987.

“Permission”

Sir Joshua Reynolds was a prominent 18<sup>th</sup> century painter. The reference and citation in this poem comes from his *Discourses on Art*, which were originally composed as lectures delivered to students at the Royal Academy of Arts between 1769 and 1776.

“Usable Past”

This poem’s last four lines, “that the wisest scholar of the wight most wise / By Phoebus’ doom, with sugred sentence says / That Vertue, if it once met with our eyes, / strange flames of love it in our soules would raise,” are taken from Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil & Stella* Sonnet 25.

“Defense of Poetry III”

This poem interacts with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and borrows the lines they hand in hand with wand’ring / steps and slow, through Eden / took their solitary way” and “four streams’ / murmuring waters fall and / the fringed bank is with myrtle crowned.”

“Pastoral”

The lines “The wise are above / books. It is for the General sort that we write” are borrowed from Samuel Daniels’ *A Defence of Ryme*.

“Operator’s Manual”

The poem makes early reference to Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* and borrows “ecstatic prose” from John Updike’s blurb on the novel’s back cover. “I’ll be the man who ran against the wind and won” references Bob Seger’s song “Against the Wind” and the poem’s last line “the lovin’ in my baby’s eyes” is taken from Taj Mahal’s song “Lovin’ in My Baby’s Eyes.”

“Poem Like a Room Within”

This poem was born out of rumination on T.S. Eliot’s “East Coker,” to which the poem makes reference.

“Materials; or Revision”

The reference to Robert Frost’s “Home Burial” is an attempt to incorporate context from Frost’s poem into mine, “Home Burial” being a dialogic narrative focusing on a couple’s emotional strain in the wake of their child’s passing.

“Confessional”

The Frank O’Hara poem mentioned at my poem’s end is called “Having a Coke with You.”

“Poet in a Denim Jacket Pretending to be a Poet”

The poem makes early reference to pop-culture figure Cyndi Lauper’s song “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” and the movie “The Goonies.” The poem’s last line is borrowed from H.D.’s poem “Night.” The original lines read “The night has cut / each from each...”

“Enargeia”

“Energia” in Sir Philip Sidney’s spelling and use in his *Defence*, is “a forcibleness” of the passions exhibited in a work of fiction.

“Defense of Poetry IV”

Poem makes reference to Mark Strand’s poem “Breath.”

“Poet Frantic and Vulnerable”

This poem makes pop-culture references to both Michael Jackson, notorious for wearing one white glove during his early performances, and Elton John’s song “Tiny Dancer,” from which the poem borrows the line “hold me closer.” The poem also references W.B. Yeats’ poem “Among School Children.”

“Confession of the Poet who Brought Books into a Public Restroom”

This poem makes multiple poetic references and allusions. Early in the poem I reference my own work in speaking of the character “Wilmot” who is a major figure in my first book, and who is based on the persona of John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, and notorious Restoration Libertine poet and thinker. The poem also makes much use of Liam Rector’s poem “I Get a Feeling” and Gerald Stern’s “In Memory of W.H. Auden.” The italicized lines are borrowed from each poet’s poem. This poem also makes use of Spencer’s stanzaic formulation used in *The Faerie Queene*, which I found quite useful in helping to emphasize the poem’s experience as my speaker’s own allegorization.

“Defense of Poetry V”

The lines “The greatest natural genius cannot subsist / on its own stock; he who resolves never to ransack any mind / but his own, will soon be reduced, from mere bareness, to / the poorest of all imitations,” are taken from Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses on Art*.

“Because there are Nights that Seem to Put One Arm First”

This poem makes use of Michel de Montaigne’s ideas on the essay as an attempt or trial, and attempts to emulate his conversational style and tone.

“Sublime Prayer”

The idea and tone for this poem came after re-reading Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. The poem also features the “duende” as a character. Duende is generally understood to be an idea of “soul” in a work of art. Federico Garcia Lorca heavily explored the idea in his lecture “Play and Theory of the Duende.” Here, I have made use of duende as a guiding force for my meditation and fiction making.

“Twenty-Something Poet Making a Mix Tape”

This poem attempts to combine the sensibilities of pop-culture icons PM Dawn, Prince, Otis Redding, Madonna, alongside the musicals *Rent* and *West Side Story*, and the feelings emanating from poets Walt Whitman, Aphra Behn, John Donne, Sir Thomas Wyatt, John Milton, and Rochester, by referencing each of them, though not using any of their lines. The idea being to incorporate my ideas concerning the trans-historical properties of poetry and extend those ideas to other contemporary art forms as a way to drive this poem’s narrative.

“The Key”

“The Key” is a reaction to Mark Strand’s poem “Darker,” which appears in his book by the same title. I have borrowed the stanzaic form as a way to both acknowledge Strand’s poem, but also to minimize my tendency toward the conversational, which is present in much of my other work.

“Defense of Poetry VI; or Poet Expected Home”

This poem references and makes use of Symphosius’ twelfth riddle, which I first encountered in Bin Ramke’s poem “Birds Fly Through Us.”

“Water Skiing with Robert Creeley”

This poem was inspired by the cover photo on Creeley’s *Selected Poems 1945-2005*, in which he is shown driving a small boat. The words in quotation marks: “there, and there” and “what one wants is / what one wants, yet complexly” are borrowed from Creeley’s poem “For W.C.W.”

“Cross-Genre”

The last two stanzas make reference to the opening of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence*, in which he writes, “...having slipt into the title of a Poet, [I] am provoked to say something unto you in the defence of that my unelected vocation, which if I handle with more good will then good reasons, beare with me, sith the scholar is to be pardoned that followeth the steps of his master.”

“Defense of Poetry VIII”

Rilke’s *Book of Images* was the prominent inspiration for this poem, alongside my thinking of my coming child’s birth. The poem allowed me to use Rilke’s work to coincide with my life and own work. The Rilke poem mentioned at my poem’s end is called “Evening,” though I confused, in memory, Rilke’s image of the evening putting on its garments with the image of the world unbutton its blouse, which appears in Stephen Dunn’s poem “The Routine Things Around the House.”

“Defense of Poetry IX; or Love Prayer”

The line “our bones green embers” is an incarnation of an image in James Wright’s poem, “The Jewel,” where he writes, “...When I stand upright in the wind, / My bones turn into dark emeralds.”

“The Poet Thinking of Milton’s Adam”

John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is the main poetic contact point for this poem, but Spenser’s Red Cross Knight is also included in the third stanza, as a complementary image to the image I create of Adam and Eve looking out from Eden.

“Defense of Poetry X; or Prayer”

The epigraph is from Ben Jonson’s “On My First Sonne.”

“After Mary Oliver”

This poem interacts early with Shelley’s *Defense of Poetry*’s last line “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” which I use to associatively connect to the poem’s central narrative and drive the poem toward its central use of Mary Oliver’s poem “What I Have Learned so Far.” The lines “properly attended to, delight, as well as havoc, / is suggestion,” “be passionate about / the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit / to no labor in its cause,” and “Be ignited, or be gone,” are borrowed directly from Oliver’s Poem. The poem also makes reference to Danté’s Beatrice and *Inferno* alongside Charles Bukowski’s *Love is a Dog from Hell*.

“On Making a Metaphor”

This poem borrows “A hole to place your excellent heart, Everything on / the human scale, Acorn stash, and One hundred Christmases” from Sarah Rose Nordgren’s “Possible Names for a Country House” and “It was the way she was or / wasn’t looking,” Michael C. Peterson’s “[Untitled].” The poem also borrows “What is it / that frees me so in storms? What do my shouts / amid lightings and raging winds mean?” from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

“The Poet Making a Scene”

Edmund Spenser’s entrance into this poem centers on *The Faerie Queene*’s character Calidore, who notoriously interrupts others throughout the poem. The italicized lines are directly borrowed from *The Faerie Queene*.

“Rote Memory”

The lines “I am not an earth, nor an adjunct / of an earth. I am the mate and companion / of all people, all just immortal and fathomless / as myself. They do not know how immortal, but / I know,” are borrowed from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

## VITA

Christian Anton Gerard is a poet and Early Modern scholar. His first book of poems *Wilmot Here, Collect For Stella* is forthcoming in April, 2014 from WordTech Press' CW Book imprint. He has received scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and the Prague Summer Program, Pushcart Prize nominations, an Academy of American Poets Award, and the 2013 *Iron Horse Literary Review* Discovered Voices Award. Gerard's creative and critical work appears widely in national literary and critical journals.